

H.R.F. KEATING THE STRONG MAN



THE STRONG MAN

H. R. F. Keating



BLOOMSBURY READER

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Prologue

His obituary took up only five lines in *The Times*. When I first saw it I was filled again with all my old rage against the injustices which are done and past repairing. Then I thought: No, they are right. Five lines is what he merited. Name, date and place of death, age and one short descriptive sentence. It ran something like: 'He played a prominent part in the struggle that led to the overthrow of Rolph Mylchraine, the former self-styled Grand Master of Oceana.'

Yet he might so easily have rated the really full treatment, say a solid column under the heading 'The Strong Man of Oceana'. And with the fact of his death in obscurity confronting me I found I wanted to spell out just once the whole truth.

Eventually I cast my account in the form of fiction because the after-effects of what I had to describe are still part of the living tissue, as it were, of a certain small nation. To make this fiction carry the same weight as the true reality I discovered that I had to invent a good many purely imaginary details. None of them in any way affects the central truth.

Part One

1

I saw him first in chains. It was at the very start of my only visit to Oceana since I had left the island for England. That visit itself is a good many years ago now but I still remember him there as vividly as if it was yesterday. And not only because of the chains.

I saw him just as I set foot in Lesneven again, stepping down from the quaint little train—unchanged even to its absurd nineteenth-century twirls and trimmings since I had left by it ten years earlier off to the deep-water harbour at Portharnel and a wider world.

The station is in a somewhat out of the way part of the little capital, down by the stretch of muddy foreshore they call the Strand. And, taking a long look round as I stepped down on to the wooden platform, the first thing that struck my eye was a gang of men at work near a lighter anchored in a foot or two of water off the rubbish-strewn mudflat. The sight of the chain-gang—the men linked together in threes with short heavy chains round their ankles—checked my leisurely survey as if some alarm-mechanism had been suddenly triggered off. Here was something new in Oceana.

And, as soon as I had begun to look, I saw the one man in the two dozen who stood out like a beacon. It was not only because of his physique, though even under the shapeless coarse grey blouse the sheer oak-tree muscularity of the shortish body was startlingly evident. But there was noticeably something else. It may have been simply the unfailing confident ease of his movements. Or it may have

been, even at a distance too great clearly to distinguish his features, something about his whole personality. Whatever it was, in the ragged line of chained and stooping men shifting blocks of roughly dressed stone into the waiting lighter he stood marked out, unbrutalized by the brutal toil.

He carried his share of the heavy stone blocks—destined, I guessed, for the big sprawling house I had seen from the approaching steamer rising on the crown of the low islet about a mile offshore from the town—with a sort of lack of excess, neither weighed down nor flaunting his ability to lift easily burdens which the other men staggered under. It was a thought-provoking sight.

Had I then had some intimation of how involved I was to become with that strong man, of how much his strength, and not by any means his physical strength only, was going to come to mean to me and what a tearing-apart dilemma it would one day present me with, would I have acted as I later did? Had I been able to foresee that curious conversation I was to have with him about Lord Acton, had I seen all the misery ahead, had I known about the people I was to become linked to in friendship and to see die because of him, would I still have done what I did? I think I probably would not; I am still grateful always that I did.

But this was my first moment in Lesneven after my self-imposed exile, and I felt there must be a lot more to see. I set off after the handful of other passengers—there were never very many travellers in or out of Oceana—along the dully reverberant length of the platform.

I got a taxi, a sedate old bull-nosed Morris, asked to go the long way round to my old home just beyond the centre of the town and sat back, sinking a little into the soft leather upholstery, to see what changes had been made. But, except that everything seemed rather smaller and a good deal shabbier, there appeared to be little new beyond some

fresh housing on the outskirts, a shopfront here and there that had been modernized a bit and decidedly fewer horse-drawn vehicles than formerly.

I would evidently need to look into things a little more deeply, I thought, if I was to get any real grasp of what had happened in the island.

And that was what I had come to do. I had actually somewhat over-persuaded my paper to let me make the trip.

‘You know,’ the Foreign Editor had said, ‘there’s only a fairly limited interest in your Mr Mylchraine, genuine old despot though he may be.’

I did know. I had had to explain too often about Oceana, the narrow mountain-spined North Atlantic island called till the late eighteenth century sometimes Lesnay, by its peasants, and sometimes Westward Island, by its proprietor class. I had had to tell people too often how far south of Ireland and west of France it lies to be under any illusions about how much it impinged on the world-imagination.

But I still felt a half-reluctant loyalty to my native place, and the paper owed me a bit of a jaunt. So I persisted. And now I had to produce some sort of story, a decent whack of brutal-heel-of-the-dictator stuff to give our liberal readership something to fret about in the newsless dog-days. The chained convicts would work up into a nice dramatic intro, but I would have to find a few more hard facts if the whole thing was to stand up reasonably.

And then I wondered how easy it was going to be to get those facts. Something about the muddy Strand I had not properly taken in came into my mind: there had been no one at all about. In the past this had been a great playground for the poorer children of the town, little encouraged by the respectable citizenry in Lesneven’s one public park. There ought to have been a game or two going

of the triangular form of baseball-cum-cricket the island children play. But there had not been a soul in sight. Even the other passengers from the train had hurried off along the platform, leaving me a lone conspicuous figure.

Plainly the people of Lesneven knew what went on when a lighter had to be loaded with granite blocks for the big new house out on the little island they called, from its oval shape inside the shell of Lesneven Bay, the Kernel. They knew and kept well away.

Well, I thought, at least I ought to be able to get something out of John.

John is my brother, five years younger, and the one who was content to go back to Oceana after college in Dublin to join our doctor father's practice and to stay on after the old man's death.

John ought to know about things, I thought. I'll get a few nuggets of fact out of him.

The old house was one of the many that had not changed by as much as a hairsbreadth. The same smooth white plaster walls, the same solid granite window-surrounds, the same thick, dark grey slates on the sharply pitched roof. Even my father's old brass plate was still there: P. M. J. QUINE M.B., the P for Peter, his name, M for the Michael I had inherited, J for John. Only the path round to the surgery looked less well-trodden than it used to.

Disconcertingly, the maid who came to the door was a young girl I had never seen before and I found myself having to explain on the threshold of the house that had been my home from birth just who I was.

Nor was that the only disturbing thing. The girl had scarcely apologized for herself with a desperate blush when suddenly she darted past me out on to the steps.

‘Oh, lord, there’s the letterman,’ she broke out. ‘Excuse me, sir.’

She began waving vigorously at a small navy-blue closed horsevan which had just turned into the street. I recognized it—with a fresh onset of that odd sense of returning familiarity—as from the island Letter Service. Sitting up on the high driving seat were two men. One, a youth of twenty or so in civilian clothes, would have been a boy when I had left but the other, a grey sidewhiskered man in the old blue letterman’s uniform, seemed to be a figure I had known, though I could not for the moment place him.

In response to the excited shrieks of the servant-girl he pulled up the single staid horse between the van’s shafts. The girl ran out, the short broad ribbons of her large white apron streaming.

‘The master said I was to look for you,’ she blurted out. ‘You are coming from the steamer, aren’t you? There was a packet he wanted urgent. From London via Dublin, it was.’

The old man turned and opened the top flap of the van.

‘I dare say we’ll be able to get that,’ he said. ‘If it’s got English stamps on it it shouldn’t be that hard to find.’

He hauled up a blue-coloured, close-woven sack and began to pile the letters and packets from it on to the seat beside him. The young man next to him moved along, with rather bad grace. When about half the sack’s contents had been piled out the old man suddenly looked across and gave me a beaming smile. At once I recognized him. For years he had been our morning letter-man.

‘I seem to have a letter for you here, Master Michael,’ he called out. ‘Arriving by the same steamer as you, if I’m not mistaken.’

‘It must have done,’ I said. ‘Though I can’t think who’d have written so soon.’

I went down and held out my hand to take the letter from him.

‘Just a minute.’

It was the young man in civilian clothes.

He reached forward and whisked the letter out of the letter-man’s knobbly brown fingers.

I was too startled to do more than stare up at his pale glistening face.

Looking back with a grin of sheer impudence, he prized up the envelope flap and took out the letter. I recognized it then as from a girl in London, a fool of a creature who would write as soon as I had left.

The pale-faced young man opened out the single sheet and began to read. I found my voice.

‘What the devil are you doing?’

‘It’s all right, matey. It’s only a love-letter.’

He crammed the sheet of wildly scrawled-upon paper back into the envelope and flipped it down to me. I returned to the attack.

‘Now, look here, I don’t know who you are—’

‘Wait a minute, Master Michael.’ The old letterman leant down. ‘That’s just about it, sir,’ he said. ‘You don’t know who this gentleman is.’

‘But—’

‘He’s from Mr Mylchraine’s office. Comes with me to collect Mr Mylchraine’s own personal letters. I think it’d be better, sir, if you just let the matter be.’

He looked at me with his face devoid now of the least twinkle of good humour.

‘All right,’ I said, ‘if you think so.’

The letterman buried his head once more in his sack and after a few moments located my brother's packet. I followed the maid into the house.

The effusiveness of my brother's welcome swamped the uneasiness I felt. In the upstairs drawing-room he offered me in quick succession a chair, a drink, the window shut, the window open. I hardly found time to wonder why such warmth should be shown to one who had done no more towards keeping the family together than send a card each Christmas.

Come to that, I thought, John had done equally little about me when I was five hundred miles away in London.

Sitting at last on the faded blue-silk, vaguely eighteenth-century rail-backed sofa, I looked up at this brother of mine.

He would now be just thirty and he was unmarried, unless he had never bothered to let me know. He appeared to be a person who did himself pretty well. He had certainly put on a fair amount of weight and there was a floridness in his face that spoke of gourmandizing meals and a good deal of drink.

I had noticed in fact that the whiskey he had insisted on at this comparatively early hour had come from a bottle of Irish and not from one of the decanters in their locked tantalus standing, as in my father's day, on the glass-fronted mahogany bookcase. Evidently the need for alcohol had become too frequent to allow of the old pleasant ritual of unlocking the tantalus's wooden bar.

'Your letter was very reticent,' John said, standing in front of the empty fireplace and looking down at me.

He sounded disapproving, as if he had now shovelled past the loose shale of his welcome and come to sterner bedrock.

There didn't seem to be much point in telling you all my news since I was going to see you,' I replied.

‘No, I suppose not.’

He gave me a sudden sharp look.

‘Is this—er—what you might call a professional visit?’ he said.

The incident outside the house had made me jumpily wary. I stalled.

‘No, I had some holiday due and suddenly decided I’d take it here. It’s nice to see things don’t seem to have changed.’

‘They have and they haven’t,’ John replied solemnly.

He was always one for taking life seriously, and I abruptly felt I couldn’t stomach the lecture I saw coming.

‘I’ll amuse myself spotting what’s new then,’ I said. ‘But tell me about yourself. How’s the practice?’

It was a pretty duff question. In a stick-in-the-mud place like Lesneven, for all that it is the capital of an independent nation, a general practitioner’s life is not going to change dramatically from one decade to the next.

But the remark seemed to upset John.

‘Oh, things are all right, quite all right,’ he said stiffly.

‘Have you moved the surgery?’ I asked. ‘The path round to the side looked as if it wasn’t so much used.’

‘The pattern of the practice has rather changed.’

‘That interests me,’ I said. ‘You mean that even in Oceana change takes place in such a thing as a doctor’s practice?’

‘I’ve become a specialist, as a matter of fact.’

‘A specialist? In Oceana? When the whole island hasn’t got a population of as much as a hundred thousand? What do you specialize in?’

The paler Parts of John’s fattish florid face darkened up.

‘I specialize in skin complaints,’ he said. ‘I’ve been fascinated by them ever since I was at Trinity.’

‘And Oceana is rife with skin troubles? There’s something new.’

John gave me a purely furious look.

‘Skin-disease is not rife in Oceana,’ he said. ‘It just so happens that one person in Particular has a complaint that needs very specialized treatment.’

‘One person? Who on earth ...?’

My voice trailed away. There was only one conceivable person in Oceana wealthy enough to keep a medical specialist for himself alone. Mr Mylchraine.

If you can afford to build a grandiose mansion on a small isle awkwardly cut-off from the mainland, if your word is law in a whole country, if you have gradually acquired half the wealth the place produces, then you can have your personal skin physician. And Mr Mylchraine was all of these.

I blessed the caution that had stopped me telling John the actual purpose of my visit.

‘I suppose you don’t approve of such an exclusive connection?’ he said into the silence I had left.

But before I could answer he strode abruptly to the open window, put a hand on each of the brass hooks on the lower frame and brought it swishing down. The growing sound of stumblingly marching feet, which had just impinged on my senses, was sharply cut off.

2

The devil of contrariness, which had lurked all through my talk with John, shot up. I pushed myself off the old sofa and went to the window that had been so abruptly shut. If there was something Mr Mylchraine's personal skin physician did not want me to see, I found I was determined to have a good look.

Down in the street I saw at once the convicts I had watched loading stone for Mr Mylchraine's new house over on the Kernel. The man I had been so impressed by was in the centre of one of the short chain-linked ranks. His head was held up, not with any air of bravado, but simply and naturally. And again I was struck by the oaken width of his chest.

But now I noticed as well another aspect of the little procession, evidently tramping back to the old town gaol for the midday meal: the uniform of the two guards, tight dark-green tweed jackets and breeches and high-crowned hats sporting stiff bunches of pheasant's feathers. One of the two carried a shotgun, lightly tucked under his arm as if at any moment he might let fly with a left and a right as a covey whirred up from the street ahead. His companion swung a riding-crop, whacking it from time to time against his gaitered leg.

I turned to John.

'Who are those fellows?' I asked.

'Fellows? What fellows?'

‘The ones in charge of that little procession of convicts you wanted to keep away from my tender eyes. I imagine they’ve been loading stone for your Mr Mylchraine’s new house. One of the sailors on the steamer pointed it out.’

‘Yes,’ John said, suddenly sharply severe, ‘and I dare say the fellow wasn’t Particularly complimentary either. We’ve had a lot of trouble from the steamer crew recently. We had to gaol one of them, and Mr Mylchraine’s forbidden them to come ashore.’

However I was not going to be sidetracked.

‘But those guard fellows? Who are they? Is this some new uniform for the Watch?’

They’re Keepers.’

‘Keepers? What do they keep? A private collection of convicts?’

John sighed. Heavily.

‘They’re Mr Mylchraine’s gamekeepers,’ he said. ‘From his place out at Gilvinneck. Originally.’

Gilvinneck was one of the largest of the big estates which shared between them almost all the country. It lay about twenty miles south of Lesneven, almost at the dead centre of the ninety-mile long island.

‘And now these chaps form a sort of private police force?’ I asked.

‘No, no. The Watch was getting totally unable to carry out its duties. Violence was on the increase, and someone had to step in.’

‘I see,’ I replied gravely.

If John was so much in cahoots with Mr Mylchraine, it would hardly be sensible to point out that since the island’s purse-strings were firmly in one man’s hands if the Watch needed improving the remedy was simple. But I could see

the advantages of substituting your own servants for the nation's customary law-enforcers. So no comment.

'Yes,' John said comfortably now. 'I'm sorry to say it's much the same here as elsewhere. There's a spirit of violence abroad. The fruit of modern times.'

I was unable to restrain a sort of laugh.

'John,' I said, 'are gold coins still in use here as they used to be?'

'Well, yes. To some extent.'

'All right. You live in the gold coinage times, then. You're not pre-1939: you're pre-1914. Oceana's got nothing to do with modern times.'

'And you think we're pathetic because of that, don't you?' John snapped. 'Well, let me tell you there are things happening in this little island no more than half the size of Cyprus which could teach a lesson to the whole of the rest of the world.'

It was on the tip of my tongue to make a joke about Mr Mylchraine as an advanced political thinker. But I checked myself. Something in the note of assertive uneasiness in John's manner alerted me.

'Things in which Oceana has the edge on the world?' I said. 'I'd be interested to hear. Really.'

For a little John did not answer, as if he regretted having said what he had. Then he heaved his shoulders off the edge of the mantelpiece, dropped down into my father's old chair and regarded me assessingly.

'There are matters like religion, for example,' he said.

That shook me.

'Religion? I never thought of Oceanans as doing more than a bit of gentle church-going at Christmas and harvest-time.'

‘I don’t mean the religion of the churches,’ John replied. ‘What’s taught there doesn’t bear much relation to the realities ever.’

‘Well, I’m not going to defend our Particular branch of the Protestant Church of Ireland,’ I said. ‘But what is being taught here that does bear relation to the realities?’

‘What’s always been taught here,’ John answered. ‘Or handed down from person to person, perhaps one should say.’

Then I was on to it.

‘You don’t mean witchcraft’s flourishing again?’

‘Witchcraft isn’t the right word.’

‘No, I suppose not,’ I said with a laugh. ‘What do you call it then?’

‘Worship,’ John said. ‘Worship of the powers that are within us.’

A thought occurred to me.

‘And your Mr Mylchraine encourages it all?’

‘It was Mr Mylchraine who saw how important it was in the first place,’ John said.

From here on I began to smell out the pattern. A people does not surrender power to a dictator, however strong, just because he asks. To some extent they may let him dominate them out of mere apathy, but he will always have to buy them as well. And what he buys them with is what in the end sells them to him.

With Mr Mylchraine it looked as if it was witchcraft that was doing the buying. He was offering its adolescent glamour and its easy appeal to the grosser instincts, and, happy with that, the islanders were allowing him total control and were simultaneously succumbing to a weakness

which would one day prevent them taking back any power, however much they might want to.

Well, witchcraft would be something to write about in the paper. Liberal readers are as ready as anyone for a little titillation at second hand.

‘You may be right,’ I said with an air of judiciousness. There is something to be said for going back to the more primitive side.’

John looked at me carefully.

‘If you haven’t any plans for this evening,’ he said, ‘there’s something I’d like to show you.’

‘I’m at your disposal.’

A momentary doubt flicked across his features. But it cleared.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘a ceremony takes place this evening. Quite an important one in the calendar of our worship. Mr Mylchraine will attend. I could introduce you.’

‘Could you?’ I said. ‘I’d certainly like it. I’ve got a feeling there may be more to him than people seem to think.’

‘Yes,’ said John decisively. ‘At about eight then.’

He regarded me with unwavering solemnity.

‘The St John’s Eve Esbat,’ he said.

I went on my own for a stroll after we had lunched.

The day was still sunny, confounding my memories of an almost perpetual shroud of the soft rain that is called in the island ‘cloaky’ weather. The word has always been the subject of one of those endless, rather acrimonious debates that enliven provincial isolation: did it mean weather that called for a cloak, or did it mean that fine grey rain was cloaking everything? No doubt the debate still raged.

However now the weather was far from cloaky and soon I was stopping every five minutes to lean over a wall or sit on one of the numerous granite mounting-posts still scattered all over the sleepy old town, though I did not see anyone actually on horseback as one had ten years earlier.

Well, I reflected at one of my stopping-points, perhaps Lesneven's a pretty ordinary place after all, in spite of chained convicts, intercepted letters and—what was it?—St John's Eve esbats.

Ordinary it certainly seemed. People were staidly going about, almost never hurrying, frequently stopping to gossip. Housewives with big round wicker baskets poked their way from shop to shop. Tenant farmers from the surrounding wolds plodded stolidly through the crowd. Here and there a strong splodge of vibrant colour was made by the deep orange shawl of a countrywoman well wrapped round sturdy shoulders. No truck here with the holidaymaker's obsession with the sun.

I met one or two people who remembered me but, though I did my best to steer the talk round to Mr Mylchraine and what life was like under his heel, somehow within moments we were always back to the girls I might have known as children who Were now married and with children of their own, or the old people who had 'passed on'.

I even bought a copy of the island paper, the *Oceana Messenger*, repeating to myself the old sourish joke of my young days 'Messenger, yes. But where's it taking the message to?' I was a little disappointed when I deliberately proffered an Irish five-pound note for this small purchase not to get any gold in my change, but I gathered from the shopman that there were fewer of the old coins to be seen now. Was this a sign that Oceana was getting modern after all?

I certainly changed my mind when I read the leading article in the *Messenger*. It was written in a thoroughly turgid nineteenth-century style, though it made its point well enough. Beyond the shores of Oceana, it told its readers, the world was in a mess.

Well, I thought, folding the crammed black sheets, what if the islanders are being told they have brought themselves tranquility as well as a little legitimized sexual excess as the price of giving their powers of decision to Mr Mylchraine? A safe life was a good deal to be thankful for.

And then, round the next corner, I came upon prompt evidence that, right or wrong, the writer of that thumping prose had at least been guilty of some tactful suppression. Because there on a sun-bright white plaster wall was an array of posters—the Band of the Lesneven Watch (Bandmaster Mr J. Orry) to play in Brignogan Park on Saturday afternoons, point-to-point races that had been held at Kermaddack two months earlier—with prominent among them a stark black-and-white bill offering a substantial award for ‘information leading to the apprehension of Dirk Gilhast, guilty of armed robbery, now believed to be in region of the Trigastell Hills’.

Guilty, I noted, without trial. I walked on, my mind switching from one view of affairs to the other with every ten paces.

In some ways, I saw, the place looked clearly more prosperous. Surely in the old days, the drink-shops had by no means outnumbered the lobster-pie bars, those unique Lesneven institutions. And the whiskey advertisements seemed to be infinitely more numerous too. No, Mr Mylchraine’s Oceana could not be all bad.

I got back home to find John had worked himself into a decidedly excited state. Striding up and down the drawing-room, he twitched the ornaments into new positions and

poured out a stream of words—about the state of the world, items in the news, anything he could lay hands on of a safely general nature. And on he went as we ate our early and hasty dinner which ended, I remember, with the island's one contribution to the cuisine of the world, a 'blayberry breaddie', a curious cold affair made from bread and blayberries, a plant unique I think to Oceana. The dish is served with thick cream and is pleasant enough to a hearty eater.

And then we set off. Although it turned out we did not have far to go, John elected to make the journey by car and when we stopped I was not quite sure where we were. I peered out into the gathering dusk. Clouds had come up while I had been indoors and it was darker than it might have been.

'Where's this?' I said. 'Aren't we somewhere at the back of the Rota building?'

John did not answer. Instead he set off at a rapid pace and plunged into a narrow doorway at the back of the Rota itself.

I have never been one for extolling parliamentary democracy, and in all my years in London I had never set foot in the Mother of Parliaments, though as a schoolboy I had watched the proceedings of the Oceanan Rota. But all the same I experienced now a feeling of shock.

Mr Mylchraine was holding his esbats in the Rota, was he? There was no doubt about it: I felt a sense of outrage.

Following John along a tall, dank, stone-walled corridor I remembered that I had in fact been vaguely aware that the Rota had ceased to meet some six or seven years ago. There had not been any great to-do about it: the situation had just arrived at the point where there was nothing left for the worthy Delegates to decide.

John turned at last and gave me a word of explanation.

This leads to what used to be the robing room. It makes a convenient way in. People are apt to gather outside the front.'

'Nothing like dodging a crowd,' I agreed.

John's attitude amused me. The great upholder of folk wisdom seemed awfully anxious not to be seen by the people absorbing his share of their rich instinctive knowledge.

But I got no more time for amused speculation. At that moment John opened the tall mahogany door at the far end of the dank corridor and came to a sudden halt like a toy train toppling off its rails.

'Oh,' he said.

I tried to peer over his shoulder to see what it was in the room ahead that had had this effect on him. Then I understood.

'I'm most awfully sorry, sir,' John said, suddenly back in the days when we had been at school together and the Headmaster had spoken a word of reproof. 'I'm most awfully sorry. I had no idea you were already here.'

'But come in, come in, my dear fellow,' said a rich voice from inside the room. 'Have you brought that brother of yours?'

John sprang into the room, as if staying outside had been a positive crime. And I had no need of introductions to know that the big man in evening dress I could now see sitting in a small brown, cane-backed armchair was Mr Mylchraine, ruler of Oceana.

'Yes, sir. Yes. This is my brother,' John stammered out. 'It was very good of you not to make any objection.'

Mr Mylchraine pushed himself up out of the little armchair and came towards me.

‘Your brother thought it necessary to telephone to me to say he was bringing you, Mr Quine,’ he said. ‘He thought I might have forgotten you were a journalist. Good evening.’

He was smiling cheerfully. I could even see that his teeth were particularly stubby. The skin of his big oval-shaped head with its short fuzz of greyish hair round an almost bald skull was of a curious waxen white so that his features were deprived of much animation. This, I imagine, was the effect of the skin trouble my brother was treating. But in spite of the dead pallor of his face there was in the deep brown eyes something that looked very much like a twinkle.

He thrust out a very white hand, small for a man of his size. I took it. It felt a little cold to the touch but the pressure of his handshake was warm.

‘Good evening,’ I said. ‘I’m really extremely interested to meet you, even though I’m here off-duty.’

Again the deep brown eyes twinkled.

‘Write about me if you want to, my dear chap. Though I’m afraid I shan’t see it. That paper of yours is something I feel I don’t have to read.’

He swung round to John.

‘You didn’t know I knew which paper your brother worked for, did you, Doctor?’ he said. ‘A little evasive on the telephone, I thought.’

John flushed a thunderous red to the very tips of his ears.

Mr Mylchraine turned to me again.

‘Naughty of me, I’m afraid,’ he said. ‘But I did happen to remember where you went from something your father said to me once years and years ago, and I couldn’t resist showing off a little.’

I smiled.

‘But what if I’d changed papers since?’ I asked.

Mr Mylchraine plumped down in the brown-cushioned cane armchair again. He gave me a quick little grin.

‘Yes, it wouldn’t have sounded quite so clever then, would it?’ he said.

He glanced round at John.

‘But I don’t expect you’d have let on I’d got it wrong, would you, Doctor?’

‘No. Yes. No, I mean.’

Mr Mylchraine left him at it.

‘Well now, Mr Quine, how do you find our little island after all these years?’ he asked me.

‘I was saying to my brother: it’s changed remarkably little.’

‘Except, of course, for the political structure.’

‘I’ve hardly had time to go into that.’

Mr Mylchraine grinned at me.

‘Oh, it doesn’t need much time,’ he said. ‘It’s simplicity itself. There’s me, and that’s that.’

Poor John felt he had to do something to smooth over the rough edges of this.

‘But I was telling my brother, sir,’ he broke in, ‘there’s much more to our present state of affairs than might appear on the surface.’

Mr Mylchraine heaved round in his little chair. I noticed now that it seemed an incongruous piece of furniture for the room, a dignified, if bare, chamber containing only a long elegant table and on its attractive sage-green plaster walls rows of curly iron coathooks. I saw the armchair as having been hurriedly brought in especially for its present occupant this evening.

‘Well, Dr Quine,’ he said to John now, ‘I think I’ll leave you to explain just how different we are from what we seem. It will be the—er—religious angle, won’t it?’

And before John had had time to reply Mr Mylchraine turned to me again.

‘A great glosser-over, your brother,’ he said. ‘But I admire him for it, of course. It’s a useful gift. Was he always so good at it?’

‘I don’t know,’ I replied. ‘Perhaps he had less to gloss over when we were boys.’

Mr Mylchraine laughed.

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘I don’t think there’s really all that much to hide. I hope you’re not expecting a great deal from this evening, for example. I’m afraid nothing much will happen, you know.’

He darted me a sudden shrewd glance from his rich brown eyes.

‘Or nothing at least that doesn’t happen often enough behind closed doors elsewhere,’ he added.

‘But this will be in public,’ I said. ‘Or to some extent in public, I gather. And that does interest me.’

‘Well, you must go round the island asking your questions then, Mr Quine. And write up all our excesses in that terrible righteous paper of yours afterwards.’

‘I understood you didn’t much like the island being written about.’

‘Understood? Is this something more your romantic brother has been telling you?’

But I thought I had caught him out now.

‘No,’ I said. ‘Not my brother. The paper applies for visas for a reporter to come here every twelve months or so. And

invariably they get turned down.'

'Yes, yes, they do,' Mr Mylchraine replied equably. 'I gave instructions long ago not to admit anybody of that sort. It's not so much what they would say, but who might read it over here. People would feel a fuss was expected of them. And they're really very happy as they are. But if you want to write something, my dear fellow, please feel you can.'

That's very kind—'

'I shall have to see it doesn't get to the island of course. But that isn't difficult.'

He pushed himself to his feet once more.

'And now, Dr Quine,' he said to John, 'have you forgotten that I like to have a little while to myself before my own part is reached in this life-renewing ceremony?'

John blushed again.

'Oh, no, sir, no,' he said. 'I'm most awfully sorry if—Come on, Michael.'

'I'm told lots of actors like a few moments to think themselves into their part before going on,' Mr Mylchraine said as a Parting shot.

He thrust out his small white hand to me again. I shook it. The twinkle was still in his eyes.

John almost pushed me through the other door of the robing room in his anxiety to go when asked, and consequently I found myself propelled with unwanted abruptness along a short broad passageway and into the Rota chamber, thus missing the few moments for reflection I would have liked between these last five somewhat disconcerting minutes and arriving at the much-heralded esbat. On the one hand, there was a good deal of adjustment I felt I might want to make in my picture of the ruler of Oceana after meeting him in such unexpectedly

informal circumstances. And on the other hand, I confess I had developed towards the coming events of the evening more than a touch of curiosity, a feeling sharpened if anything by Mr Mylchraine's recent ambiguous remarks about what I might expect to see.

So, once in the chamber, I stepped aside from John's forward rush and stood firmly where I was to look about me.

The Rota chamber is not large, but it is in a quiet way impressive. It is circular in shape with a high domed ceiling and tall walls broken all round by long narrow windows filled with small panes of soft, greyish, old-fashioned glass—though now on this rain-threatening evening most of the light was coming from the enormous chandelier that hung from the middle of the fine plasterwork ceiling.

The central floor of the chamber was designed to be bare, a circle of radiating bands of alternate white and dark grey stone. This floor is surrounded by a parapet of dark panelling, its top sloping to form a narrow desk running all the way round the first row of delegates' seats. The parapet is broken only three times, twice where passages lead to the robing room and to the main entrance, once for the slightly raised president's chair and the clerks' table in front of it. Behind the first row of seats there is another, giving a place to each of the sixty delegates. And behind the two banked circles of green-leather seats there runs a wide circular walk where the servants of the house and such visitors as want to hear the debates can move about.

Altogether it makes a simple and impressive effect. Or it had done so up till now.

3

Now the simple dignified chamber had the air of something that has been raped.

Crudely nailed between the high windows on the back walls there were roughly daubed pictures. They had been painted in garish colours on tall sheets of wood and had been surrounded by long swathes of black bunting. They depicted mostly satanic-ally horned creatures prancing up to each other in grotesquely sexual poses, like the obscene drawings done by adolescents everywhere. There was nothing really offensive in them, for all their boastful salacity: they offended solely because of the brutality that had been used on the old building in order to display them.

Something of the same arrogant insensitiveness came off from the central circular floor, bare and quietly patterned when I had seen it before years ago. Now it was covered with a jumble of trestle-tables burdened down with large copper pans steaming with curious-looking dark round little puddings and dozens of spigoted casks underneath which stood tall copper jugs.

The whole was lit by torches. They had been placed in crude lengths of black-painted drainpipe and were made of some aromatic wood on to which strong-smelling waxes of various sorts must have been added because they burnt with spurts of irregular flame, purple and greenish, and gave off heavy coils of thick greasy smoke which curled upwards and left their traces on the plasterwork of the dome above.

And the people who had arrived—the room was perhaps one third full—simply added to the impression of thoughtless crudity. They were, to begin with, all a little drunk. They were mostly flushed in the face, as far as I could see in the mixed uncertain light, and they were all too ready to burst into peals of shrill laughter. And then they plainly gloried in adding their share of damage to the quiet old building. As I watched, I saw one young man jump from the broad rear gallery down on to the higher circle of delegates' places. His heel caught in the back of one of the seats and ripped away a long strip of the green leather, leaving an ugly whitish gash.

John felt a need to apologize. But not for this Particular incident.

'It may sound as if they're rather excited,' he said. 'I'm afraid not everybody realizes this has a serious side.'

'Yes, they don't exactly look as if they're in church,' I replied.

But this was just the cue John needed. He turned round at once and launched into a lecture.

'Now, that's where you make your great mistake, old boy,' he said. 'Just because this is a religious festival, you expect it to be simply another version of the old, drear, meaningless routines of the established churches. But those people over there are much nearer the truth of things than you are, however noisy and idiotic they seem. Because this is a celebration of the living urge in the human psyche. It is an occasion of joy, of unbridled delight.'

And staidly he led the way to a pair of the green leather seats in the upper row of delegates' places.

'We'll do quite nicely here, I think,' he said. 'We don't want to be too conspicuous. But on the other hand we want to be able to see.'

‘And what exactly shall we see?’ I asked him. ‘With your hints on the one hand and Mr Mylchraine’s attitude on the other, I don’t know what to expect.’

‘We shall see what we shall see, shall we?’ John answered, in an extremely unsuccessful attempt at waggishness. ‘If I simply described what is likely to take place, it might seem all a little juvenile perhaps. But I think all the same you won’t feel that by the end of the evening.’

And, as if to take what steps he could to make sure his words came true, he signalled sharply to a man in a long green apron passing in front of us down by the panelled parapet. The man leant up towards us and handed John across the empty row of seats one of the tall copper jugs that I had seen under the torch-lit casks. From the pocket of his apron he then produced two small drinking horns, and these too he handed up. I looked at them in mock remonstrance.

‘Here,’ John said, filling one from the jug and handing it to me. ‘This is an occasion when it’s the done thing to drink in church.’

He laughed.

I took the little horn and sniffed at the contents with caution.

‘Only whiskey,’ John said. ‘Did you think it’d be goat’s blood or something?’

My habitual misgivings in face of the unknown must have shown themselves too plainly on my face. They certainly had the effect of switching John into a state of high good humour.

He filled his own drinking horn with a great air of bravado, holding the tall copper jug up above his head and sending a long stream of whiskey pouring accurately downwards. Then he lifted the horn high.

‘To the deeper instincts,’ he toasted. ‘We’ll teach you a thing or two about yourself before you leave the island.’

He drained his horn in one. I felt obliged in return to do more than sip at mine. It did have whiskey in it. And a long swallow of neat Irish is something I’m not exactly used to. I felt the blood pound up to my face in seconds.

John laughed again.

‘If you ever do leave the island, that is,’ he said.

A quick, irrational fear shot through me. Mr Mylchraine had seemed pleasant and human enough. But there had been that bland assumption of the privileges of power. . . .

‘What do you mean? What do you mean by that?’ I almost shouted at John.

He leant back in his wide green-leather seat and laughed till the tears actually came into his eyes.

‘But nothing, Michael, nothing,’ he spluttered. ‘It’s just that it’s nice to have you back, nice to have the remnants of the family together again. And I hope perhaps you’ll decide to stay on. I hope you’ll find the way things are here now more to your liking than they were in the old days.’

He leant forward and clapped me on the knee. I looked at him bleakly.

‘It’d be nice,’ I said. ‘Only of course I’ve got a job to go back to.’

Even at the risk of making myself look a fool by playing the sobersides I felt a need to make my position crystal clear. I was not going to have anything to do with Mr Mylchraine’s Oceana, whatever it was really like.

And, as I had expected, John roared with laughter once again.

‘Don’t worry, old boy,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry so much. I assure you, if you stay here for the rest of your days it’ll be

entirely of your own free will. Relax.'

Things were certainly going his way now.

I sat there beside him, transferring my wretched drinking horn from one hand to the other because until it was empty it could not be put down and I was determined not to have more to drink than I wanted. I wished profoundly that I have never pretended to John that I had any interests in new-found religion.

Increasingly quickly now the Rota chamber was filling up with Parties of newcomers, most of them already as drunk and excited as the earlier arrivals, and none of them personifying exactly the wisdom of the people. Serving-men in their long green aprons hurried about with the tall copper jugs. Fresh wax was put on the smoky aromatic torches. The noise began to pound thumpingly on my ear-drums.

Then somewhere out of sight someone started beating a drum in a single repeated monotonous rhythm. Soon people began to tap the beat with their hands and feet. Before long a shrill pipe of some sort added a repetitive rising and falling tune. On the central floor one or two couples began to dance.

They danced no more intimately than in many a London nightclub and with much the same sort of shuffled steps you see there. But their close embraces, combined with the repetitive music and the smell and the smoke of the crude flary torches, did begin to generate a certain atmosphere.

Although it did no more to me than to give me a feeling of irritation, on almost all the other people in the half-lit building—now decidedly warm and smelly—the whole was having exactly the effect one would have expected. The number of dancers grew quickly, soon spilling over from the crowded central floor up to the broader and darker spaces of the surrounding gallery. People were beginning, too, to

throw off their clothes and the sound of their laughter grew less boisterous, more intimate.

‘The power of the dance, the ancient forgotten power of the dance,’ John said in my ear.

He seemed to be definitely affected himself. His voice had thickened with excitement and he was leaning forward eagerly, peering into the smoke-filled gloom. I began to wonder what I should do if he too started taking off his clothes and beckoning the nearest girl to join us as I had seen other men do.

‘Not really a forgotten power,’ I said sharply. ‘Jazz dance sessions have been like this for fifty years.’

The remark did seem to sober John up a little. He glanced round almost furtively, as if acquaintances from medical school days in Dublin might somehow be present.

‘I dare say jazz dancers do get excited,’ he hissed at me. ‘But what you don’t realize is that here we have excitement with a purpose. These people aren’t just going to dance and then go home to bed. This is just a beginning.’

‘And at the end,’ I asked, ‘are they really going to do anything very much different from what a lot of dance-hall couples do?’

But John did not rise to this.

‘You’ll see,’ he answered. ‘I’m quite happy to let events speak for themselves.’

He picked up the tall jug and filled my drinking horn and his own once more. I touched mine to my lips—and began looking round to see if there was anywhere I could conveniently dispose of it.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘I can’t guarantee to stay all night, you know. I had an early start on the steamer this morning.’

‘Oh, you won’t have all that long before there’s a decided change in the atmosphere,’ John replied.

He looked at his watch.

‘It won’t be long now till the Master comes,’ he said.

‘The Master?’ I replied, determined not to let John get away with any home-brewed mystification.

‘Mr Mylchraine has the title of Master at an esbat,’ John answered with all the solemn conviction of some heraldry expert warming to his subject.

I looked at him straight in the eyes.

‘And the Master makes a great ceremonial entrance about now?’ I asked.

‘When the time is ripe,’ John replied. ‘But you shouldn’t have to wait long. And when the Master’s present you’ll notice a very different feeling, even here in Lesneven. And one day we must see if we can’t get you invited out to the Kernel. Things can be done in the seclusion out there which people over here are still not ready for.’

Unable to find anywhere to put the wretched horn in my hand, I took another cautious sip of the whiskey in it and waited. The hidden drum still beat on remorselessly. The shrill pipe kept up the same repeated tune. Almost everyone was dancing now. One or two of the girls I saw were already bare to the waist. I decided I would not pay them the least attention.

Everywhere drinking horns were being brandished high. The torches were constantly being fed with more wax and their dark-coloured flames were spurting higher and higher, giving off a headier, murkier smoke.

And then, quite suddenly and without any warning, the beating drum and the scrawny pipe ceased to play. Abruptly and right in the middle of their little repetitive tune. And at

the same instant the big central chandelier was completely extinguished.

The dancing dropped swiftly to nothingness. The murmurous laughter and the giggly screaming died. I saw that everyone had turned towards the passageway from the robing room. I sat watching that black square in the sulphurous gloom of the torchlight as intently as any of them.

We did not have long to wait.

A bright yellowy light grew up swiftly in the blackness and from out of the entrance there came prancing twelve goat-masked creatures in couples, male and female, bodies wholly naked and gleaming with some dark thickly-plastered grease. Each held at full stretch above their head a flaming torch of tow, brighter and less wax-impregnated than the others. And in their free outside hands they all flourished long snaking carter's whips, flailing and cracking.

The whole business of their timed entry was certainly sharply dramatic.

I enjoyed it as much as if I had been in the theatre. On the main body of the dancers, however, the effect was much more intense. Excited as they were by drink, the repetitive music and close bodily contact, they greeted the bounding entrance of the goat-creatures with one long joyous sobbing howl of delight. Even John, who had done little more than I had to stir his passions, caught in his breath and lunged to his feet.

And then Mr Mylchraine came in.

He was not naked. He had made hardly a concession to the atmosphere that had been created for his arrival. All he had done was to envelop himself in a black cloak falling right to the ground and to put on his bald head a round black cap fitting closely to the shape of the skull.

Under this his big oval face looked even more waxen white than it had in the robing room. His large heavy body under the thickly-draped folds of the cloak moved with a slow stateliness.

He was looking slightly downwards in an abstracted thoughtful way and seemed to be paying no attention whatsoever to the scene which, I realized now, he had had carefully set for himself. In cold silence he swept his way over to the vacant tall-backed president's chair. In front of it he stood for several seconds—it seemed, even to me, longer than it must have been—looking broodingly downwards. Then he turned and seated himself.

Still there was complete silence. No one moved as much as a muscle. There was no whispering, no stifled giggles.

Then from under the enveloping black cloak a pallid hand appeared, extraordinarily more pallid in this gloom than in the prosaic light of the robing room, and made a commanding permissive gesture. At once the drum began to throb again, faster now I thought, and the shrill pipe started a new, more jagged tune. Voices all round burst out suddenly into excited sound. The tall copper jugs gleamed again as they were lifted high and tilted for pouring.

‘Well?’ John asked softly in my ear.

‘He certainly knows how to assume a presence, your Master of the Esbat,’ I replied.

I looked down at the heavy brooding figure in the tall-backed chair.

He did indeed seem a different person, I reflected, from the human, if alarmingly self-confident, man I had met in the robing room. He had talked flippantly there about the part he had to act in the coming ceremony, and it was true that he had done nothing since he had come in here that an actor of authority could not have done as well. Only the

actor would have been appearing in a theatre, and this was not a theatre. This was part of life. That was quite plain. It came back at you from every single one of the people on the circular floor in front of Mr Mylchraine, in the double ring seats round him, in the encircling gallery behind. They each and every one were, not spectators of Mr Mylchraine's performance, but people linked to him by bonds that were part of reality.

Crowded, noisy and animated though the whole round room was, everybody in it was paying heed to the black-cloaked un-moving figure in the dominating president's seat. The dancing couples danced side by side so as to face him. When people drank they lifted their drinking horns to him. Every word spoken loudly was said as if he might hear it. Every shrill laugh was ready to be stilled in an instant for him.

That brooding figure was real enough. And yet so had been the man who had joked at John's expense as he had sat in the little brown armchair that only just fitted his big body in the robing room.

The drum beat on. The scratchy pipe played and played its new sharp tune. The dancers whirled more furiously. The twelve goat-figures stood at the edge of the floor looking glint-eyed at the scene in front of them as if they were waiting for their moment.

And then one of the half-naked girl dancers ran suddenly forward, stopped in front of Mr Mylchraine's chair, ripped away the skirt, which was all she wore, flung herself first backwards with arching torso and then forwards to kneel prostrate on the ground.

The noise dropped abruptly in the crowded murky room. The sound of the primitive music seemed suddenly isolated and distant. Two of the goat-masked heralds stepped quietly forward and held their clear-flaming tow torches so that

their light fell strongly on the figure crouching at Mr Mylchraine's feet. All eyes were on her. But for a long time nothing happened.

I looked down myself at the long white back rising to humped white buttocks over crouched knees with a mass of dark hair fanning out on the floor at the front, spread towards the still black-robed seated figure. I told myself that I had to be careful.

And then the waxen white face was lifted from its brooding position and took one long look all round the crowded room. And, apparently satisfied with what he had seen, Mr Mylchraine now raised his pallid right hand in a second gesture of command.

For a moment I was uncertain what it was that he had ordered to happen. Then two more of the goat-creatures, one a man, the other a woman, stepped forward. They had abandoned their torches. But they had not abandoned their long carter's whips.

The noise in the room and the music had died away completely now. In the bright yellowy light of the two torches the naked girl at Mr Mylchraine's feet crouched unmoving. Or almost so. I could not quite make out whether the tiny movement I saw was only the effect of the flary torchlight or whether she was lightly trembling.

It was the male goat-masked figure who delivered the first blow.

The sound of the long whip singing through the air could be heard with complete distinctness. And then the crack as it landed on the naked back. And next an awed shiver of a sigh from the onlookers when across the whiteness a dark contused line slowly grew.

Then the female goat-masked figure struck from the other side. The prostrate girl gave a sharp whimper as the whip

fell.

And I watched. It isn't so often in this life that one's sadistic impulses are so thoroughly catered for. I felt I should not watch, but I watched.

And the whole silent assembly watched with me, taut, unmoving, greedy as blow succeeded blow.

Then something caught my eye. Perhaps it was because I had managed after all not to be quite so intent as the others were. Perhaps it was only that I was well placed to spot it.

A sudden scutter of movement in the darkness of the passageway from the main entrance.

I wrenched my gaze right away from that cross-wealed, white-fleshed back and I peered into the darkness across on the other side of the floor.

And, with a crystal-cold shock of astonishment, I saw what it was that had caused that sudden distracting movement. There, standing just inside the chamber, bare to the waist, looking bewilderedly all round him, was none other than the strong man I had seen before in chains.

4

Hardly had I taken in the presence in the Rota chamber of that unmistakable oak-tree solid frame and realized that I was looking at not simply a fugitive, but a badly-perplexed and hard-pressed fugitive, when for the first time since his ceremonial entry Mr Mylchraine spoke.

‘Enough.’

The word rang out in the hushed room, halting at once the terrible regular cracking reports of the alternating whip strokes and even stopping for some moments the now continuous whimpering cries the prostrate self-chosen victim had been uttering.

And then babel broke out. If the round high-ceilinged room had been noisy before, it was doubly so now. The drum was beaten again and at full force. The scrawny pipe screeched high above it. And tense, suddenly released laughter pealed out everywhere.

In the gloom beyond the one single strong patch of light where the bloody-backed girl was now slowly getting to her feet, couple after couple embraced and danced and ran drunkenly backwards and forwards. No one at all seemed to have eyes for the bull-shouldered, half-naked convict standing peering bewilderedly round in the darkness of the entrance passageway.

But I recognized that without immediate help he was unlikely to remain free much longer. It was plain he could not go back the way he had come, and only someone with plenty of time to look at what lay ahead could possibly pick

his way quickly across to the other exit through the confused jumble of dancing whirling bodies lit only by the darting light of the smoky resinous torches.

Without even thinking, I stood up.

‘Won’t be a second,’ I said to John.

I hoped vaguely that he would think I needed to go and find a lavatory or something, but I did not wait to offer more explanations. Quickly I scrambled up on to the wide rear gallery and went round it at a loping run. There were a good many people there dancing as wildly as those on the centre floor but it was possible, if your eyes were accustomed to the gloom and the irregular glare of the torches, to make your way past them quickly enough.

Within less than half a minute I was round at the point where the main entrance passage led to the centre floor. The strong man was almost directly below me. I had been quite right about his difficulties. He had advanced only a yard or two further along the passage and was holding his hand above his eyes, trying to see beyond the smoke of the torches and the swaying of three-Parts naked dancers.

I swung myself up on to the rail at the edge of the gallery and dropped down to the floor of the passage below, a matter of eight or ten feet. I landed a couple of yards away from my man.

At the thump I made on the floor he swung round like a jungle animal.

‘This way, quick,’ I blurted out.

If I had left it a second longer, I am sure his fist would have come swinging towards me. But the tumbled-out words got through to him. He moved a single pace nearer and waited attentively.

I took his arm by the wrist and ran with him down to the centre floor. The crowd there might be too dense to get

through in a straight line, but I had an idea that by keeping to the edge of the circle we would be able to get round to the other passageway without being forced to a complete halt.

And I was right. Twice I had to push unceremoniously at a naked back to shift some interlocked couple jammed up against the panelled parapet at the floor edge. But each time the pair of them simply moved in the direction I had shoved and otherwise paid no attention.

‘Down here,’ I said, as we reached the passageway at last. ‘It leads out at the back.’

A quick glint in my companion’s dark eyes showed me he understood what I was doing.

I took a last rapid look back to see whether there was any sign of pursuit. There was. Four or five of Mr Mylchraine’s Keepers in those slightly ridiculous countrified uniforms with the pheasant cockade hats had just come in at the main entrance. They all carried shotguns, but evidently they were as baffled by the half-darkness and the noise and wild movement as my convict had been.

There shouldn’t be too much difficulty in getting enough of a lead over them, I thought.

And then I saw something else. My brother.

He was standing up in his seat and looking across from the group of dazed-seeming Keepers to the pair of us at the other exit in a fashion that showed clearly he too had appreciated the situation pretty quickly. Even as I looked at him he must have seen my face turned in his direction.

He waved at me as much as to say ‘Hold that man or else ...’ Deliberately I pointed with outstretched arm away down the passage. If John was going to give me orders, I was going to let him know quite clearly that in Mr Mylchraine’s nasty Oceana I was not on his side.

Rain was falling when the pair of us emerged from the back of the Rota but there was still a good deal of light. Coming from the murky gloom of the esbat this surprised me, but I realized that in fact I had probably not been in the building much over an hour.

I glanced at the convict. He was standing crouched slightly on the balls of his feet, looking from side to side.

‘Do you know the town?’ I asked rapidly.

‘Middling little.’

They were the first words I had heard him speak. It came as a slight shock that he pronounced them with a thick country burr. Somehow from the independent way he had held himself I had thought him a cut above a simple farm-worker.

‘This way then, I think,’ I said.

I ran towards the narrowest of the three streets leading from the tiny square at the back of the Rota. I knew my way about here much less than in other areas.

I had formed no clear plan of how we were to get away eventually, but I knew that whatever we did we had to do without pausing. If I had guided my fugitive quickly through the crowded esbat, John could guide the pursuing Keepers just as rapidly. The lead we held a few moments before had been abruptly wiped out.

We ran hard down the narrow street with the dark stone walls of its terraced cottages gleaming in the rain on either side. At the far end I took the turning that seemed easiest. It led into another similar street, neither more nor less hopeful. But there was nothing else for it but to run and run till some opportunity of dodging into hiding presented itself.

After a little we did come into a broader street which I more or less recognized. I paused for an instant and then decided that the best course was to head away from the

centre of the town. Down where the lobster-pie and drink shops were there would be bound to be people about, and if they did not actually try to lay hands on us they would certainly get in our way.

As we set off again, running side by side, I thought I caught the distant sound of shouting. We thudded on, and I saw heads appearing at lighted windows here and there. Invariably as soon as our two running figures had been spotted a curtain would be sharply drawn, extinguishing in an instant the warm patch of colour. It was an ominous sign: we were not going to find shelter in Lesneven.

And before we had got more than two-thirds of the way down this road we heard the Keepers come running out of the side-turning behind us. Slogging on, not daring to look back, it was nevertheless all too easy to make out that they had clattered to a halt to look left and right. And then came a ragged shout that told us we were spotted.

So it looked as if they were making better speed than we were. It was not surprising. Beyond having sprinted occasionally for a bus back in distant, enormous, reasonable London I was in no sort of training. Already I was feeling sick with effort. And the bare-chested convict did not seem capable of going much faster. How much had he already taxed his robust frame in getting out of gaol? Altogether, it looked as though it would not be long before we heard the whistle of heavy shot from the Keepers' guns.

As soon as we reached a turning we took it without a word of consultation. But at the end of this new road things became abruptly different. The solid rows of houses came to an end, the tarmac roadway and granite pavements simply stopped. Ahead lay the wide muddy quakingly soft stretch of the Strand.

A waft of numb despair came over me. I had tried so hard, I felt, surely I had deserved better than this. Out there on

that desolate foreshore the Keepers could shoot us down like a pair of fairground targets. And there was nowhere else to go. Long before we could run back up to the turning the pursuing party would have reached it.

I stood there robbed of all initiative. The level greyness in front was interrupted only by the railway station away to our right, a quaint silhouette on the stilts that raised it from the mud. And, just discernible some fifty yards from it, there was the square shape of the floating lighter. To the left there was nothing. The foreshore ran on, I knew, broader here, narrower there, till it came to the one small quay that served the few boats that braved the treacherous currents of Lesneven Bay. And, in the other direction beyond the station, there was equally nothing.

‘Come on,’ said a thick voice by my side.

It was the convict. In trying to haul some miracle out of the factual impossibility that confronted me, I had left him out of my scheme of things. But he spoke now with a decided sharpness, and I set off at a run again behind him.

Within half a dozen paces our feet were squelching horribly in the mud, and its smell of decay came heavily into my nostrils every time I drew in a gasping breath. But my companion showed no signs of wavering. Impelled by the sight of his broad bare back, and with nothing in my mind but the sound of that suddenly sharp voice positively ordering me on, I staggered forward through the softly falling rain.

We were heading towards the station: there was nothing else to make for. But I could not conjure up any effective hiding-place there. The little wooden building was totally isolated. Even if we broke into it, we could be surrounded without the least trouble. And besides that one building there was nothing. One could scarcely hide behind the piles

on which the single platform rested: they were just not thick enough.

I glanced back. The Keepers still had not come out into the open. It looked as if we should at least reach the station before then, little good though it would do us.

Looking round again, I saw that in fact we were heading not for the station but for the water's edge in a direct line with the square shape of the half-loaded lighter.

Plunging heavily on, keeping my eyes fixed to the ground to avoid the litter of old spars, tin cans and discarded motor tyres sticking up from the gluey embrace of the mud, I thought there might be some sense in making for the lighter. If we got to it before we were spotted, the Keepers would almost certainly assume we had gone into the station. It would at least be a respite.

We came to the edge of the sea. The lighter floated about fifteen yards out now, a great square hulk.

The convict half a pace ahead of me turned his head.

'Get down,' he barked out.

I was too astonished not to obey instantly. I fell forward into the water, noticing at the back of my mind that thanks to the warmth of the day just ending it was softly tepid as it soaked in on to me.

Beside me the convict had sprawled forward equally quickly. I heard him swirl gently round in the mud-thick water.

'Keep still,' he whispered. 'They're standing there looking.'

I lay with my outspread hands gradually sinking into the ooze underneath me, staring at the rusty shape of the lighter. The back of my head felt terribly exposed. A long time seemed to go by before my companion spoke again.

‘They’re going over to the railway. They’re not too clever then.’

He swished round till he was lying alongside me.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘But middling slow, mind. We don’t want to make a stir.’

Cautiously we pushed ourselves on our hands towards the lighter, like two lumbering grampuses. By the time we got there we were half swimming, half wading. Without a word being said, I followed the convict round to the seaward side of the big iron craft. He reached up and hauled himself aboard. I followed.

Certainly it was a reasonable temporary hiding-place. The granite blocks on the landward side had evidently been stacked as high as they were to go but on our side there were still half a dozen more layers to be put in place. So we had a solid rampart some four feet high between us and any observers on the shore.

I knelt up beside my fellow fugitive and peered over. The light was failing fast but it was just possible to make out the green-uniformed Keepers. They had reached the railway line and were walking towards the station. I looked in the other direction. We were going to have to go a very long way before we could get out of sight. And out at sea, I saw, the sky was pale. Figures at the water’s edge would stand out all too clearly.

‘We’ll have to risk leaving the moment the Keepers reach the station,’ I said quietly.

‘We’re not leaving.’

I thought I detected an almost contemptuous quickness of disagreement in the short phrase. It was certainly presented as a statement of fact. But I decided that I must have been misled by the thickness of that country burr.

‘If we stay,’ I said, ‘we’re bound to be caught. They can’t fail to work out we’re here.’

‘But they’ll never count on us making a little hidey-hole, though.’

He slapped the new-cut granite blocks in front of him.

It was certainly a thought. If we could shift enough blocks to make a hiding-place it was possible the Keepers would fail to hit on it. But the blocks looked enormously heavy. And there would be very little time.

‘Come on.’

My fellow fugitive set to work at speed, grabbing at a block from the top of the rampart and with a grunt of effort heaving one end out. Then he began lowering it. I stepped forward to take the other end.

‘Leave her. She’d knock you flat.’

The words were brusque. But this was no time for politenesses.

I stood back.

‘Let me know when you do want help,’ I said.

Heaving the next block down, my friend croaked a terse reply.

‘When they go back.’

I waited, watching with confused admiration the way he handled the blocks. One, two, three, four, five, six. He heaved each out from its tightly packed place and swung it down to the stones at our feet.

‘Right,’ he said at last. ‘Now to stack two over there and get the rest back.’

Barely three minutes had passed since he began. His extraordinary strength would be needed to the full to get

these solid blocks up again in the time left in such a way as to conceal the narrow hole he had now made.

‘I’ll lift one end,’ he said. ‘Then you hold while I get the other end up. They’re mortal heavy, mind.’

I did as I was told, tucking one shoulder under the sharp edge of the first block he lifted. But when the full weight came on to me I thought I was going to buckle under it. Then my companion began to lift the other end. The weight on my shoulder grew. Sweat suddenly stung my forehead.

And if this is what I feel, I thought, what about him? He’s lifting it with his hands.

‘Now, roll her.’

Gratefully I leant sideways so that the heavy block tumbled into its place above. I rested for a moment against the cool stone of the rampart. But my companion had already scrambled round to lift the next.

I still cannot quite believe that the effort needed to lift all the rest of those deadweight blocks in the short period we had was actually possible. I know that time and again I thought I was going to fail in my own small Part. And each time, faced with the evidence of so much more being done by my companion, I did not dare let myself give up.

But at last the end came in sight.

‘Up with you now. Have to look sharp.’

Trembling uncontrollably, I scrambled up.

‘Slip this one nearer the edge with me, and after that you can get in.’

It needed even more force to slide that last block to a place where it could be tipped in over us. Its new-cut surface grated with jagged obstinacy the whole way. In little half-inch jabs we jerked it forward and with every shove it

slewed maddeningly out of line and had to be slewed back again. But at last I heard a grunt of approbation.

‘Should do there. Now, get in, quick.’

I crawled, shaking, round the block. The gap I had to slide into was very small, and for a moment I doubted whether I was lithe enough. And then I said to myself that it was this or a backful of shotgun pellets. And I put my feet in and wriggled and scraped myself and tugged at my sea-sodden clothing and at last dropped down into the low oblong we had built.

Now the convict scrambled in while I flattened myself against the far side. Soon he was beside me, half sitting, half lying.

‘Are they coming?’ I asked, more out of a need to reach out to somebody than for information.

‘Not yet.’

It was a barely grunted answer. And then he reached up to the last block with one broad hand and tugged hard. Slowly the heavy stone toppled over towards me. Yet more slowly he let it sink. I saw with acute pleasure that it was going to fit neatly on the tiny ledge allowed for it. It seemed somehow an omen of success.

And then we were shut in. The darkness seemed complete. I lay there, hearing my companion’s heavy breathing gradually quieten, and I thought ‘What a fool I was to think of omens. Luck is two-sided.’ I wanted to leap up, fling off the heavy stone and run and run.

5

Suddenly a sharp sound rang out, a shouted word. It seemed to come from within a yard of the narrow sealed cubicle where the two of us lay stiff and motionless.

‘Now!’

I almost screamed aloud. Sweat flooded over me.

They’re here, I thought. Did they see the stone moving? They must have been coming up very quietly, and that shout was the signal.

But in a moment the sound of quick querying voices came to us, it seemed, from various directions. Plainly the hunters’ expectations of surprising us cowering behind the piled stones of the lighter had been disappointed. Soon after there came the clanging of booted men clambering up the vessel’s iron sides.

‘Not a sign,’ said a voice.

‘Well, where the hell are they then?’ another voice said.

‘I dunno.’

‘They must be here, I tell you.’

‘All right, where are they then?’

‘P’raps they’ve made themselves a little lair under the stones.’

The voice sounded distinctly doubtful, but I went cold with fear. I saw myself suddenly exposed to the light, like a darkness-whitened centipede, and then crushed.

A moment later the long thin line of faint light at the edge of the final block was suddenly blotted out in two separate places.

Hands, I thought. Fingers. Someone is going to lift the block.

I forced myself to keep my eyes open.

‘No,’ said a voice horribly close to my head. ‘Can’t shift the bastard.’

And then the second voice called over to the beach.

‘They must’ve got away. Try back towards the town.’

We lay and listened to the clanging on the lighter’s side as the boards got down. Then there were a few sweetly distant shouts. And at last silence. But neither of us moved. I even decided not to whisper a word till the barrel-chested man beside me had spoken.

And then I wondered why I had. I had handed over the initiative, it seemed. At some point he had become the leader and I the led.

I lay there speculating about just what had occurred. Here was this man, physically strong as a brute of course, but who seemed from his thick country accent to be no more than a farm labourer or small tenant at best. And here was I, educated, knowing the world, quite capable of holding down what is generally considered a tough job. Yet at some point in our joint flight this simple fellow had just taken charge.

People did it. It was odd. Some of them—I thought of a former Editor of the paper—did it by sheer willingness to shout, bully and lose their tempers. Others, my present Foreign Editor was an example, achieved it in almost exactly the opposite way, by smiling and smiling with underneath an unswerving assumption that what they wanted they would get. And, of course, there were degrees to it. After all, I myself had my quantum of strength. Confronting a certain

sort of person in an interview, I knew that, however much they wanted to tell me nothing, they could not. But I had learnt over the years I was one of the ones who were only to watch what went on at the top, to look on for instance at my ex-Editor yelling like a spoilt three-year-old shamelessly carry it off every time against the cold smiles of the Foreign Editor. And I knew, too, that however often I saw this I would never assert myself over the latter, except at a wildly disproportionate cost.

‘Going to see if I can get a sight of ‘em.’

It was my companion, my leader.

He began to lift at our heavy covering block. For a cold moment I imagined a ring of grinning Keepers, shotguns pointing, watching the square-cut stone move inch by inch. But that was only imaginings. In a little the block was high enough for my companion cautiously to thrust his head out.

‘No one,’ he reported.

He squeezed himself out and I followed.

The last of the day had gone and it had stopped raining. A diffused moonlight was pouring down.

‘We’d better be moving, I suppose,’ I said.

‘No.’

The answer was flatly uncompromising.

Damn it, I thought. This is where I should take over again.

But at once the counter-thought came into my head that if ever anything was pointless it was conducting a running power struggle with my fellow fugitive in hostile Oceana.

I looked at him, out of the side of my eyes. This was the first chance I had had to give his face more than the quickest of glances. Under a shock of black hair, it was broad and dark-complexioned, one of the typical faces of the island. The nose was short, the mouth wide but very

straight, the cleft chin determined. The eyes, hidden below a beetling brow, were dark. Later, when I came to know them better, I found they were a deep liquid brown often filled for hours with a faraway inward-turned contemplativeness which was to remind me time and again of the slowly changing little fields and pervasive quiet of the world which for half a lifetime was all he knew. But this look could, I was to learn, turn to something very different, a hard alertness which, if one took into account only the impassive features, it was possible entirely to miss. Possible but foolish.

‘Tell me,’ I said, putting the first of a good many questions beginning to buzz in my head. ‘How did you get put in gaol in the first place?’

‘I’ve got a smallholding out on the Kernel. It used to be enough to keep me from being idle and I never paid much notice to what was going on over in Lesneven and places. Then one day they came along and took three Parts of my land for that great house they’re building. Just like that. No payment. Nothing. We’d have starved. So I told ‘em be damned. And before I knew it I was in the town gaol here with a couple of chains round my legs.’

So, I thought, that accounts for the strong burr. The Kernel is only a small island, perhaps seven miles long and five wide at its broadest, and it is not far out to sea but it had always been extraordinarily isolated, thanks to the terribly dangerous currents in the mile of water that separates it from Lesneven. So quiet it is that they used to say people lived in the middle of it who had actually never seen the sea. An exaggeration, no doubt, but one that accounted for my friend’s burr, and probably too for his self-sufficiency.

‘And how long ago was that?’

‘Eighteen months. Tonight was the first chance I had of getting out.’

‘How was that?’

‘They put me in another cell. As soon as the door was locked I tried the window bars and one of ‘em was a bit loose like. I got it bent in the end.’

‘But the chains?’

‘They come off at night.’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘now we must think how we can get over the water. Luckily I’ve a fair amount of cash on me, all I brought for a fortnight’s stay here, so we ought to be able to find a fishing-boat that’ll take us to Ireland.’

I gave him as much of a smile as I could muster.

‘In a couple of weeks,’ I said, ‘we’ll have you fixed up with a job in England and this will be just a bad dream.’

He wheeled round and thrust his face near mine.

‘Do you think I risked maybe my life getting out of gaol for that?’ he demanded.

‘But—but for freedom.’

‘I got out of gaol for one reason only—to fight Mylchraine.’

It was not the sort of statement to which you reply ‘How interesting.’ I stood in silence looking out to sea and thinking over all that that one fiercely uttered sentence implied. It was a long time before I spoke again.

‘I don’t even know your name,’ I said eventually.

‘It’s Keig. Thomas Keig.’

Keig. The name is an old one in the island. It is pronounced there to rhyme with Haig. No doubt this man’s forefathers had farmed the same parcel of land for hundreds of years. And then Mr Mylchraine had come along with his plans for that enormous house, and Keig had been in his way.

I looked at him.

‘Do you know the name Marshall Tear?’ I asked.

‘No.’

‘No? He’d be disappointed to hear that. Marshall Tear lives in Dublin and is the leader of what they call the Revolutionary Council of Oceana. He used to be headmaster of Brignogan School till he voiced his opinions about the liberty of the subject a bit too freely. I suppose, in fact, he was lucky to get out. But that was some years ago.’

‘And what’s he done since then?’ Keig asked abruptly.

I smiled.

‘It’s a pretty big task to overthrow someone as well entrenched as Mr Mylchraine,’ I said. ‘Especially if you’re almost completely without funds.’

Keig made no reply. He stood beside me in disconcerting silence for what well might have been five minutes, perhaps even more. His expression, when I turned to him once or twice, was deeply withdrawn. It was almost impossible to see the eyes under the beetling brow.

Then at last he seemed to jerk to life.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘that’s it.’

He swung round to face me.

‘The first thing is,’ he went on, ‘my wife over there on the Kernel. She’s to come with us. They’ll take her else. They’ll think to get me back that way. So it’s over there we must go, and as immediate as we can.’

‘Yes. But how—’

‘The one thing they’re sure and certain to do is watch the boats round about as soon as they find they’ve lost us. So we’ll go over as we are, in the lighter.’

I was a little taken aback. True enough, a watch was likely to be kept on the boats, but there seemed to be all sorts of

risks.

‘Look, couldn’t we swim it over there?’ I said.

‘I might, but I doubt you could,’ Keig answered bluntly. ‘I’ve known it swum once or twice but never except at the neap. No, we’ll go over this way. When we get there they leave the lighter untended while they go for a meal. Once we’re off, I know men as’ll row us out to the steamer when she goes by next. And she’ll take us up. We had one of the sailors in gaol.’

I thought it over. It seemed logical enough, once the initial risk had been taken. But that first move still looked incredibly foolhardy. Was there some wild streak in this man in spite of his calm and settled way of approaching things?

That was a question I was to ask more than once.

But that night Keig emanated such quiet confidence that I actually slept. We worked first to enlarge and improve our hiding-place, a task that went without a hitch. Except when, looking out to sea once, I spotted something dark moving across the moon-silvered water towards us and made a fool of myself by panicking over what Keig was quick to identify as a seal, one of the occasional ones to be seen in the channel between us and the Kernel.

This however was the only incident and after it I spent, to my considerable surprise, quite a good night stretched out beside Keig in our well-constructed coffin-for-two. When he woke me the light in the quarter-inch slit we had for air was already bright.

‘Train from the quarry’s coming,’ he whispered. ‘The gang won’t be long after.’

Nor were they. And following their arrival things seemed to go exactly as Keig had told me they would. It even became deadly monotonous lying there hardly daring to

move a muscle as the loading was completed. I grew hungry, too. Achingly hollow-stomached with it. The blayberry breaddie I had eaten at home seemed far, far in the past.

But at last there came a new burst of shouted orders and I realized that the loaders were being put to stand in two lines along each side of our cumbersome vessel for the crossing.

It was just as the last of them were taking their places that the progress which Keig had outlined went drastically askew.

6

I had been watching our thin slit of light as the convicts went past it one by one when, after it had been blotted out once a little longer than previously, there came, almost as if from inside our hide-out, a quick gasp of surprise and a voice saying quite loudly 'Mr Keig.'

'Ssssh.'

Keig spat the sound out. From the far side of the slit there was silence.

Lying beaded with sweat in an instant, I realized what must have happened. The convict put to stand just in front of our air vent by a chance in a thousand must have seen Keig's face. An inch to either side and nothing would have been visible. But he had not only spotted Keig, he had spoken his name.

Would one of the Keepers have heard?

I lay unable to think of anything but the sequence of events that would follow. At last I heard Keig whisper.

'Jim? Jim Caley?'

'Yes?'

'Did any of the Keepers see you speak?'

'No, no. I swear they didn't.'

'Quiet. Say as little as you can.'

'Yes, Mr Keig.'

‘Now listen. Forget you ever saw me. Understand? Put it right out of your head. Forget it immediate. It was a dream. Just that.’

There was a silence. Then a whispered reply in an uncertain tone.

‘But, isn’t there any way I can help?’

‘Listen, lad,’ Keig hissed. ‘I’ve been good to you odd times, haven’t I? In the lines down here at the lighter, I’ve taken a bit of the weight off you, haven’t I?’

‘Yes, yes, you did. When you saw I couldn’t bear it any longer. There’ve been times you kept me from going mad.’

‘Then listen.’

Keig was plainly putting all the force he could into the whispered words.

‘Forget you ever had a sight of me here. Turn away from me now and never think of me again.’

‘Yes, but—’

‘Do it now.’

The thin slit beyond Keig’s head winked fully into light again and stayed so.

Keig remained staring at it for the whole time it took them to fix the tow-rope and get us under way. But the slit did not darken again and bit by bit he relaxed.

I think I would have reproached him then. Certainly the thought was boiling inside my head. This was exactly what I had feared. We had put ourselves, with incredible foolhardiness, into the lion’s jaws and if we had succeeded in staving off disaster it was a miracle. But we had hardly been moving three minutes when I had other things to concern me: the square old lighter started to roll like a rhinoceros and soon I was appallingly sick. In the narrow

confines of our hiding-place the effect of that does not bear talking about.

But, after what seemed one of the longest hours I had known, the crossing did at last come to an end. I heard voices calling over the water as our towing craft cast off, and then there was a jarring boom as the iron lighter ground against a stone jetty. At last all motion ceased.

'Looks as if it's going to be all right after all,' I murmured out of sheer relief.

'No,' Keig whispered. 'Jim Caley'll talk.'

'Talk? Tell the Keepers? But why? He asked if he could help.'

'He won't want to talk. But he will.'

'I can't see how you can be so sure,' I replied in a burst of irritation.

'I know the lad. He's young. He came from a nice family. He took prison and the beatings harder than most. As soon as it comes to him he knows something that could get him out he won't be able to help himself.'

'But he hasn't betrayed us up to now. You've misjudged him.'

'It's not his time yet. He wouldn't let himself tell in front of the others. But at break time he'll find a chance.'

Hope died: Keig's reasoning was too plainly well-based.

And once again things happened just as he had predicted. Immediately after the chain-gang had been disembarked they were marched away for the midday meal. I heard their shuffling steps fade away with blank dismay. Keig at once began easing the block above him upwards.

Would the movement have been observed? There could well be some idler on the jetty looking straight at us.

Keig heaved himself on to one elbow and took a fresh position under the long slab. And again, with infinite slowness, he eased it up. Light came pouring in. I saw Keig turn strainingly and peer out.

‘All right?’ I asked, furious with anxiety.

‘Seems quiet enough.’

Keig worked slowly to get the block clear with the minimum disturbance. Till abruptly there came the sound of booted men running hard towards us. At once Keig surged to his feet, sending the slab crashing on to the edge of the lighter with a clang like a giant tocsin.

I began shoving myself up into the space he had vacated. My legs felt ridiculously wobbly. Ahead I saw Keig poising to dive into the sea. And then came a shot. I heard the droning swish of heavy pellets without realizing what they were till the noise of the gun broke on my ears.

Keig made a low powerful plunge. I staggered to the lighter’s edge and tumbled in haphazardly after him. The sea seemed fiercely cold after the long fug of our hiding-place. I gasped for breath and struck out. The dark blob of Keig’s head was about ten yards in front. He turned as he heard me.

‘Keep under,’ he shouted.

His dark head disappeared. I swam on for a few strokes, already out of breath.

Then, with a wide hissing splash, a circle of buckshot struck the water a little to my right. I dived. Fear did wonders for my swimming. I got through stroke after stroke, my lungs bursting, determined not to come up. Dimly ahead in the green murkiness I made out a swirl of movement that must be Keig.

When at last I did break the surface I saw that he too had come up for a single gulp of air. I let the blessed coolness

stream into my own lungs and then resolutely plunged my face down. But I did so with the faintly comforting thought that while we had both been on the surface no shot had been fired.

I swam on, the water streaming past my body and through my clothes with satisfying speed. And then I abruptly realized that I was in the grip of a really powerful current. The discovery gave me a moment of blind panic, only stilled when I saw Keig's shadowy form ahead.

Soon I felt I must surface and look round. The jetty seemed extraordinarily far off. I rolled over on to my back and took a long look. I could still make out a small group of Keepers in their dark green uniform but already details were beginning to blur.

I turned to see what Keig was doing. He too had surfaced and he was swimming easily some fifteen yards away, turning to head for the shore. I swung myself round and struck out.

Even in those few seconds we had been swept noticeably further. I tried to gauge the direction we were being taken in: it was straight out to sea. The jetty stood almost at the south end of the isle and already we had been carried well past the southernmost headland.

I swam as strongly as I could, but I seemed to be able to make no impression on the water. Soon Keig appeared at my side, and before long he had to tell me to catch hold of his trouser strap.

Before much longer again the buffeting of the waves and the unyielding drag of the current sent me into a swoon of exhaustion. Hours seemed to pass. I kept swimming mechanically like a running-down clockwork frog, and I imagine my strokes were about that effective. I knew nothing. Only all around me the salt cold battering of the water, and, like something half-seen at the end of a tunnel,

the feel of my numbed hand on the twisted sodden cotton strap of Keig's trousers.

When my trailing feet struck a rock I did not at first realize what had happened. Dimly I conceived it as some new menace to fight off. And then it came to me: I had touched bottom. We were saved.

Keig must have carried me up the beach where we landed and into a little wood that grew on either side of a stream. And it was lying there, propped against the narrow trunk of a birch, that the sound of his voice brought me to reality.

'How are you doing then?'

I felt as if I could not move a muscle, but nevertheless marvellous.

'All right,' I said.

I tried to smile.

'That's grand then,' Keig said. 'I must be off shortly, you know.'

'Off? Where?'

Panic swept me to sudden vigour.

'To fetch Margaret,' Keig replied stolidly. 'I'll have to make haste. They won't be certain we were swept out to sea: there's sure to be a hue-and-cry. And they'll remember Margaret's over here sooner or later.'

The reminder of the position we were in and of all we would have to do before we were finally safe brought back what seemed an intolerably oppressive burden to me.

'You're going to stick to your plan then?' I asked.

'No, I've had to make it a bit different,' Keig said. 'It'll be no use trying to get a boat to take us out to the steamer now. They'll have a good watch on them, the Keepers will. Or if I was in their shoes I should.'

‘But if we can’t get a boat ...’

‘We’ll have to make one, won’t we?’

‘Make one?’

What had he been planning while I had lain there half-conscious?

‘Make not what you’d call a boat, but a raft like. It shouldn’t be too hard, not when I’ve fetched a few things from the farm. A raft won’t get us out to the steamer direct though, she passes too far out. We’ll have to go to the mainland. The current’ll take us, you should know that.’

‘Yes.’

I lacked the heart to respond to the rough joke. But I did look up at Keig as he leant over me.

‘You saved my life,’ I said.

A slight smile curved his wide straight mouth.

‘Did you think I’d leave you to drown?’ he asked. ‘If it hadn’t been for you yesterday, I’d have been dragged out of that place by the Keepers and flogged till I couldn’t stand.’

‘That place?’ I said. That place was the Rota. Didn’t you know?’

‘The Rota? No. I told you, I hardly know one street in Lesneven from the next. There was a bit of a crowd outside and I thought I’d best get in among ‘em. Then I saw the door.’

He frowned abruptly.

‘And what was doing in there?’ he asked. ‘Mylchraine closed up the Rota years ago.’

‘He was holding what they call an esbat,’ I answered. ‘A witchcraft ceremony.’

‘He was?’ Keig queried, a look of sharp interest seizing his whole face. ‘Was that him? Mylchraine?’

‘Yes, that was him. Had you never seen him before?’

‘No,’ Keig said slowly. ‘But I’ll know him when I see him next.’

He sat there in silence, and I lay still against the narrow birch trunk. After a minute or so he spoke again.

‘Esbat, did you say?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes, he has them up at the house here as well, in the part that’s already finished. There’s plenty mortal eager to go, too. Ones you’d have thought decent folk.’

‘I can imagine,’ I said. ‘And to think ten or fifteen years ago all that was just something a few old people went in for in the country, innocently enough too.’

Keig looked up into the trees on the far side of the stream. His eyes were clouded in thought, as though he were struggling with some complex problem.

‘Fifteen years back,’ he said, ‘Mylchraine was no more than an estate owner among all the other estate owners in the island. Then he began taking first this, then that. And now he lords it over those esbats of his and watches others make beasts of themselves because they think it’ll please him. How did he grow from one into the other? How does that happen?’

He asked as if he expected an answer. He was applying to me, the educated man, for information. And, in face of the challenge of such totally honest simplicity, I knew I ought to produce an equally honest, though necessarily less simple, reply. And I did not feel able. I was, it is true, still physically exhausted; but it was not this that made me blindly unwilling to tackle the question. I just was not—I knew it of myself—capable of going on and on, painstakingly truth-testing, past however many horizons of human nature it would have to be to bring back the untarnished answer.

But Keig had twisted round to look me full in the face. He was waiting for that answer. A fool thrush suddenly cascaded into song somewhere over on the other side of the dell.

I snatched at a ready-made stop-gap.

‘You know what they say: Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’

I could see Keig fasten on the words and mentally worry at them like a dog trying to get at a bone greasily wrapped in layers of paper.

He jerked himself a bit straighter.

‘That’s a saying?’ he asked.

‘Yes. Yes, it is.’

‘Who said it?’

I blinked.

‘I believe it was Acton, Lord Acton, the English nineteenth-century historian.’

Keig’s deep-set brown eyes glowed suddenly to incandescence.

‘It’s not true,’ he said. ‘It doesn’t always corrupt, having power. Only sometimes it does. Sometimes more, sometimes less, sometimes not a bit. That stands to reason.’

‘Well,’ I said, more than a little taken aback, ‘perhaps the phrase is a little over-neat, but people have been happily quoting it ever since.’

‘And what’s the sense in that?’ Keig said angrily. ‘Going about telling only half the truth. They’re wrong. Wrong.’

I decided there was no reply I could reasonably make. Keig sat there glaring ahead at the inoffensive trees for

perhaps half a minute more. Then he abruptly rose to his feet.

‘I’m away,’ he said. ‘I dare say I’ll be gone three hours or more. You can break sticks for the raft. Thin ones, three or four foot long.’

And he strode past me, on up the side of the stream and into the tangle of bushes at the head of the dell.

I was too astonished even to wish him luck. And, lying there still propped weakly against that birch tree, I thought with foreboding that luck was what he was likely to need plenty of, making his way from one point to another in the confined area of this small isle.

7

For some time I lay where Keig had left me, with my back up against the thin trunk of the birch tree, with the deep blue of the sky visible above me through its thin branches and with the sun-warmed air gradually drying out my sodden clothes. But then at last I heaved myself to my feet, filled with a sudden determination to make myself useful.

I scrambled, rather totteringingly, up to the edge of the dell and cautiously explored the area round it. To my satisfaction I found that there was not even so much as a cottage or a barn in sight. Comforted by the thought that I was in no immediate danger of discovery, I went back to the dell, found and ate with trembling hunger some hardly ripe elderberries and hung up my coat—precious wallet still in it—shirt and tie so that if anyone did come by later I would look reasonably respectable. Soon I even felt relaxed enough to crouch behind a bush and perform my natural functions. And then I spent a lot of time breaking off all the thin branches I could lay hands on and piling up the sticks ready to be bound into bundles for Keig's raft.

From time to time I took a few minutes off to make a careful survey all round to make sure I was still in no danger of being caught unawares. It was between quarter and half past four by my watch—which had unexpectedly lived up to its guarantee of being waterproof—when in the course of one such sentry tour I spotted Keig returning. He was striding towards the dell blithely enough accompanied by a woman, each of them hefting a substantial bundle and Keig

carrying in addition over his shoulder a long-handled axe whose polished head glinted sharply in the sun.

I waited with some curiosity for a closer look at the woman by his side. What sort of a wife had Keig married, I wondered.

I did not have to wait long to find out. The couple advanced over the rough pasture towards me without seeming to take any precautions, and soon they were near enough for me to risk calling out.

At the sound of my voice Keig ran quickly forward.

‘Are you well?’ he asked. ‘We’re in luck so far. I found out there aren’t so many Keepers on the isle. They’re guarding the boats but they’ve few men to spare for a search. So we should have an hour or two quietly enough anyway.’

He dumped down his heavy bundle and leant the formidable-looking axe up against it. He stroked his chin.

‘I had time for a shave at home even,’ he said. ‘That sets you up, you know. Sets you up grand.’

I thought it somewhat odd all the same that, even if the hunt was a little less hot than we had feared, he should have taken time for such a marginally useful activity as shaving. Plenty of people in Oceana wore beards, and it was even much more common there than in television England to see men with a two or three days’ growth on their chin. But I was to find out later that shaving was a positive obsession with Keig: it was almost as if he felt, like a vice-versa Samson, that his strength depended on having a face free from hair.

Altogether, however, he looked now a lot sprucer than when I had seen him last. He wore his own jacket and trousers, rough enough countryman’s working clothes but infinitely better than the shapeless coarse convict’s garments I had first seen him in. And, with the thick black

stubble off his cheeks, he looked altogether a good deal more ordinary than before, though nothing could conceal that tremendous oak-tree girth of chest.

I turned to look at his wife, who had by now scrambled down into the dell light-footedly enough and had dumped her scarcely less large bundle beside Keig's. I suppose she must have been about forty then, a tallish full-figured woman, holding herself noticeably well. Though there were a few strands of grey in her free-flowing mass of black hair, and though the exertion of crossing the little isle had put a sheen of perspiration on her pale face, hinting at less than perfect health, she was nevertheless, I thought, decidedly attractive. She wore the clothes that countrywomen in the remoter Parts of Oceana still kept to, a long very full-skirted dress with over it the ubiquitous orangey-red shawl. But the dress, in a dark green gingham sort of material, did at least match well with the colour of the shawl, a piece of taste uncommon enough in my younger days in the country districts.

I waited for Keig to introduce her, but he said not a word. So I smiled and wished her good afternoon.

'Good afternoon to you,' she answered in a low voice with every bit as much of a country accent as Keig himself.

But she said no more, simply standing there beside the two big bundles with her eyes to the ground. Keig immediately began bustling about, pulling some bread and a long piece of sausage from his bundle and handing them to me to eat.

'Did you get sticks?' he inquired shortly.

With a certain amount of pride, I showed him the large collection I had made, dumped in piles behind various bushes so as not to be too noticeable to anyone passing. But he took it all as a matter of course.

‘Margaret,’ he said, ‘find that twine and start on the bundles.’

His wife, without a word, produced a large hank of heavy twine and began dividing up my piles of sticks into thick rounds.

‘We’ll need more branches yet,’ Keig said to me. ‘You’ll find a knife in Margaret’s packet. I’ll cut some cross-pieces.’

He picked up his axe, its handle smooth with years of use, felt its balance with a plain air of pleasure and marched off in the direction of a useful-looking birch sapling further up the dell.

We all three worked with hardly a word exchanged for something over half an hour, by which time the raft was beginning to take shape. Then Keig called abruptly to Margaret.

‘Leave that now. Climb up to the top there and see if there’s any sign of anybody on the move nearby.’

Margaret silently knelt on the bundle of springy sticks she had been working at and swiftly tied the last knot in the twine round it. Then she rose, dusted her hands lightly together and set off for the head of the dell. She had to pass close to where I was hacking away at some birch sprigs and I decided to say just a word as she passed to soften the harsh edge of Keig’s order. I suppose I was influenced by the fact that she was an attractive woman. The set of her head on her shoulders brought out a touch of the cavalier in me, but no more.

‘He’s a great one for driving people on, that husband of yours,’ I said with a smile.

She lifted up her head for a moment and I caught a glimpse of sharply scornful eyes flashing at me. Whether she would have added a comment or not I do not know, because hardly had I spoken myself when Keig suddenly

came striding up, swept by me, scrambled a step or two up the bank of the dell and taking his wife's wrist between two fingers and a thumb helped her up. It was a gesture of telling protectiveness.

I bent down to my struggle with the pliantly resistant birch twigs thinking hard about this new item in my stock of information on my companion in adversity.

I had been working for less than ten minutes more when Margaret Keig's voice came low and urgently from her observation point at the top of the dell.

'Keig. Keig. There's dogs barking down over by the lane.'

Keig stopped at once and listened hard, as I did. Very faintly in the distance the sound of concerted barking could be heard.

'Come down,' Keig called to his wife. 'We'll have to patch the raft up as best we may and be off.'

Margaret came scrambling down and we all three set to work at top speed to get the raft in a fit state to put to sea. It took us less than five minutes. Then while Margaret and I seized the two big bundles, Keig hefted up the whole contrivance and staggered down with it out of the dell, across the short strip of soft sand at its mouth and into the sea.

He swung the raft over his head and lowered it into the water, where it bobbed encouragingly enough. Margaret and I lowered the bundles on to it.

'Get on yourselves now,' Keig said.

We knelt on either side of the cumbersome craft. By now it was a good deal lower in the water but it still seemed to have plenty of buoyancy and I felt moderately hopeful of our chances. Keig placed his long axe carefully beside Margaret and then bent down and began shoving us slowly forward. I picked up one of the leafy branches we had hastily cut for

want of better paddles and swished it energetically through the water. It appeared to make little difference.

‘Once we catch that current...’ Keig muttered as he pushed.

Remembering the terrible sucking drag that had impeded every inch of our progress towards this very spot only a few hours earlier, I felt a decided flame of hope. Once we had got fairly out into that we would be swept well beyond sight of the shore in minutes.

But we were not getting out into the current. That was becoming moment by moment very plain. Already we were moderately deeply out. The surface of the sea came now almost up to Keig’s chin as he pushed us. And the raft had in the meanwhile been sucking up water like a sponge, and sinking inch by inch lower as it did so. Margaret was paddling now as frenziedly as I was, but neither of our efforts seemed to help much.

Keig tapped me sharply on my ankle as I knelt there.

‘You’d better get in the water and help me,’ he said. ‘I’ll be swimming in another couple of yards.’

I laid down my paddle and slid off the side of the raft, a sudden miasma of unwillingness spreading all through me as I felt again the chill touch of the water round my middle.

But there was no time to indulge in fine sensations. We were still no more than fifty yards from the shore. Anyone coming out of the dell on to that small strip of sand could not help but see us at once. No doubt we were still within shotgun range. I put my hands on the back of the raft and kicked out with my legs for all I was worth.

With Keig swimming strongly beside me, we began making some slight progress. But it takes a tremendous amount of effort to impel a mattress of bundled sticks through water, and we were not going by any means fast.

Keig lifted his head from the water beside me.

‘Put the packets in the sea,’ he said to his wife.

Margaret took one frightened look back at the so-close shore and then one after the other tipped the two big bundles off the raft. The one I had carried down to the beach had been heavy enough, and I imagine that both of them must have contained a good many weighty articles. They sank in seconds.

Keig and I kicked on. The cumbersome square raft moved soggily through the water. I took a quick glance back. We had gained ten yards, if that. And still there was not the slightest sign of that powerful tug which earlier had fought us to within feet of the beach when the tide had been running that much differently.

Again Keig lifted his head from the water.

‘Margaret,’ he said, ‘you’ll need to get in yourself. Hold hard to the raft and you’ll be safe as can be.’

‘Yes, Keig,’ she said.

She moved to the side of the clumsy, swaying platform. Keig still had his head up, looking at her.

‘You’ll need to take that dress off too,’ he said. ‘It’ll have you under, the way it is. Hang it from the side.’

It was a fine summer’s afternoon. No doubt two hundred miles away to the east of us the beaches of Cornwall were at this moment crowded with bikini-clad women lazing full length in the sun. Even some twenty miles away on the one stretch of decent bathing beach Oceana possessed there would be girls in scanty enough swimsuits. But I knew that what Keig had just asked of his wife was something that struck to the very heart of her sense of decency.

I sank my face into the water in front of me and kicked out savagely.

And in a minute or so something soft and clinging wrapped itself round my foot for an instant. I jerked it clear. And next moment I felt the sodden raft rise sharply up and all at once we began to make faster progress. I took my face out of the water but still kept my eyes fixed firmly on the ragged white ends of the bundled sticks in front of me.

Before long I heard Keig's voice, low and cautious.

'Stop now. Hold on hard and I'll turn her so she comes between us and the shore.'

I stopped my desperate kicking and felt the raft being manoeuvred round. Soon I was able to see the shore.

We were some fair way out, though exactly how far I did not like to guess. To calculate it accurately would have meant heaving my head up above the level of the brushwood bundles in front of me, and I remembered all too clearly how unpleasant the sound of the buckshot had been swishing into the water near me when the Keepers had fired at us as we swam away from the lighter. However, even from behind the screen of sticks I could see the trees of the dell plainly enough.

What would our raft look like from over there? A heap of driftwood, or something less easily explained? Would the head of Keig's axe catch the sun as it had done when he had come towards me in the dell an hour or so ago? Would that betray us?

Before very much longer I realized I was about to learn the answer. Suddenly a group of figures had come running out from among the trees. I could see them from about knee-level up, and it was clear that they were wearing the Keepers' green uniform and carrying guns.

There was nothing we could do but hold on to our platform of bundled sticks, keep our heads low and hope. I

tried to work out what our plan should be if it became clear the Keepers had spotted us, but I could think of nothing.

Through the latticework of sticks up against my face I could glimpse the group down on the beach in front of the dell and hear indistinctly the sound of voices. Apparently some sort of conference was taking place. Were they examining whatever traces we had left while getting the raft into the water and discussing what they meant? What would happen if they hit on the right answer?

Quite suddenly all of them swung round in the same direction as if a conclusion had been simultaneously arrived at. And then they tramped off along the shore.

We hung there watching them for two or three minutes before we dared believe that they were in fact going away. But eventually it was clear beyond doubt that this was what was happening.

‘They missed us,’ I said. ‘They missed us.’

‘Keep still,’ Keig muttered.

But I needed no warning: I was not going to risk budging an inch while it was at all possible that any one of that party of six or seven Keepers might yet turn round and spot me. Soon enough, however, even that danger was gone as the party rounded the nearest headland.

Without a word more, we swung the raft round and Keig and I began swimming. Within ten yards, ironically enough, we felt the current begin to grip. In half a minute more we were being whirled along at an exhilarating pace.

‘We’ll get up now,’ Keig growled after a little. ‘You first, Margaret.’

I experienced again all the awkward sympathy I had felt for her when she had had to undress and get in. But there was nothing I could do about it: with the best will in the world I could not keep my face buried in the water for all the

length of time it would take to reach some point where we could get to the mainland shore.

But I did contrive not to look in her direction at all until Keig briskly ordered me on to the raft in my turn. As I heaved my torso up I saw that she was wearing, in fact, undergarments—a short bodice and long, almost bloomer-like knickers—about twice as modest as the average swimsuit. Yet I had no doubt it was a positive ordeal for her to know I was heaving and puffing my way up beside her.

For all the rest of the trip down the Oceana coast—and it was dusk before we were swept close enough in for it to be worth striking out for the shore—I contrived to avoid looking at her as much as I possibly could.

We made a lucky landfall. The little beach the raft eventually touched was surrounded by a twenty-foot high contorted grey granite cliff. At its foot the coarse sand was even perfectly dry and still warm to the touch. As we settled down on it for the night a luscious, orangey moon appeared on the horizon out at sea.

I lay back, feeling for the first time in more than twenty-four hours that I could afford to relax completely. In the slanting moonlight I could make out some twenty yards away the forms of Keig, still holding his long-handled axe, and Margaret, carefully spreading her dress out to dry on the warm sand. Keig suddenly spoke, his voice unexpectedly loud in the soft night.

‘Sleep sound,’ he said. ‘Every Keeper in the island believes now we’re either drowned or creeping about waiting to be found over on the Kernel. They know well no one’s ever reached this side swimming unless it’s at the very best of the tide. You can count on it that we’ve thrown them off for good.’

It was quite a speech, perhaps the longest I had heard from him at any one time. And in spite of an undertone of boastfulness which I had not altogether been prepared for, it was very reassuring. I had to admit that, near squeak or not, his overall plan for escape had worked.

I was about to say as much, formally, when I saw his broad-shouldered form moving swiftly away down towards the sea. I wondered what he was up to.

I do not think I could have guessed in a hundred years.

Down at the very edge of the sea Keig planted himself squarely, feet about eighteen inches apart, firmly dug into the wet sand. Then he flexed his arms once or twice and tossed that long axe of his high up into the air.

I watched it twirl over and over, its head glinting out in the moonlight with every revolution. Keig's broad-shouldered body was black beneath it, silhouetted against that huge moon. The axe came awkwardly towards him, head foremost. He swayed easily to one side, caught it by the haft and sent it instantly straight up again. Again it twirled in the air, again the moonlight glinted regularly on its broad head—only this time it went at about twice the speed.

And again Keig caught it and sent it spinning up once more, yet faster this time. And again it came twisting wickedly down, was caught and tossed up again, came down again, was sent up one final time. Then, bringing it sharply to his side, he turned on his heel and came walking quietly back up towards us.

Well, well, I thought, he's proud of himself. He's as proud as can be.

For a moment as he came walking across the sand up to where Margaret and I lay in our different places under the shelter of the grey cliff I wondered whether I needed to

make my apology to him for having doubted that daring plan of his to get over to the Kernel in the lighter. Certainly he did not appear to need any encouragement.

As the top of his long, moon-cast shadow touched the foot of the cliffs I made up my mind.

‘Keig,’ I said, ‘I owe you an apology. I thought going over in the lighter was putting our necks into a noose. But it worked. And now all we’ve got to do is keep out of the way for a week till the steamer leaves again and we can take a boat and carry out the second half of the programme.’

In the dimness I saw Keig swing round towards me.

‘Take a boat?’ he said. ‘What do you mean, take a boat?’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘if the Keepers think we’re on the Kernel, they won’t be guarding the boats over here. We can take one without any trouble.’

‘Steal a boat? We cannot steal a boat.’

A quick resentment at this dictatorial assertion rose up in me.

‘Call it stealing, if you like,’ I said. ‘But the thing is, we’ll need a boat to get out to the steamer and we’ve got to have one.’

‘And you can’t see what you’re doing?’ Keig grated out. ‘Don’t you know a boat is a man’s living? You can’t steal a man’s living.’

I had to admit, of course, that he was right, much though I jibbed at being told so.

‘Oh, very well,’ I said. ‘We can pay someone to take us out, if we must. But I warn you: it’ll be a different matter trying that in a week’s time than it would be now. Judging by the posters I saw in the town, there’ll be a pretty fair reward out for you. So just watch out when you go offering

fishermen a nice bit of extra pocket money, perhaps they'll realize where they can make a hell of a lot more.'

Keig stood there looking down at me.

'I'm not going to rob a man of his living, and that's the way of it,' he said stubbornly.

By now I had begun to convince myself that going about negotiating for a boat trip out to the steamer was going to be an unnecessarily dangerous business. I decided to try another tack. I sat up and turned to the distant half-upright white shape that was Margaret Keig in her modest undergarments sitting up listening to us.

'Tell me,' I said to her, 'do you think we should take the risk? Do you think we'll find ourselves sold for Mr Mylchraine's fat reward or not?'

I counted on her protective instinct. I was to learn better.

'Look,' she said, 'do you really think I'll go against what Keig says? Do you really?'

'Oh, all right,' I said petulantly. 'We'll hire a boat and put a brave face on it if we're sold. I don't mind.'

'There won't be that much of a risk to it,' Keig said. 'We'll wait to do it till the last moment, and I'll watch the fellow we pick like he's never been watched before.'

He seemed calmly confident enough and my irritation, which was probably no more than the after-effects of everything I had been through, began to melt away.

'Well,' I said, 'at least we've got a whole week to look around in. With any luck we'll spot someone who looks a safe bet.'

'Yes,' said Keig. 'A whole week. There's a lot can be done in a week you know.'

He sounded just a little pleased with himself, like someone who has recently discovered something novel and

is unexpectedly presented with a chance to talk about it. He came and sat down on the sand not far away from me.

‘Didn’t you tell me,’ he went on, ‘that our people in Dublin were middling unfit to fight Mylchraine for lack of money?’

‘That was one of the things I learnt from them, yes.’

‘Then this’ll be the way of it,’ Keig said. ‘We’ll bring them a nice packet of Mylchraine’s gold when we go.’

‘Gold? You mean Mylchraine’s revenue? You’re thinking of getting hold of some of that?’

‘I am. And I’ve an idea I know how to do it too.’

I gave a sharp little laugh.

‘Now who’s talking about stealing?’ I said.

Keig rounded on me so quickly he positively bounced on the sand.

‘There’s a difference,’ he said. ‘It’s one thing to steal from a poor man when he’s done nothing to deserve it, and it’s another thing altogether to hit back at an enemy when he’s hit you. And that’s what I’m doing to Mylchraine.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Yes.’

I lay looking over at the great swimmy orange moon and thinking that I had saddled myself with much more than a mere fellow-being in need of a helping hand at the moment I jumped up from my seat in the Rota and ran round the gallery to show Keig his best escape route. I had become caught up by a moral force.

But how on earth did he propose to get his hands on the gold that flowed in to Mr Mylchraine from all over his antiquated little island? And wasn’t this a new outbreak of that streak of craziness in him that I had only just stilled my fears about? Simply because we had thrown off the Keepers was he beginning to believe he could get away with anything?

8

Keig told me his plan for getting hold of a substantial quantity of Mr Mylchraine's gold next morning before the three of us climbed our way up out of the little cove where we had spent the night. It seemed that one of the things he had learnt as day by day he had been marched down to the Strand to work on loading the lighter with stone for Mr Mylchraine's huge new house was that once a week the same train that brought cut granite from the big quarries near Portharnel took on its return trip a quantity of gold to be shipped off to Ireland on the weekly steamer.

'It used to be lobsters the steamer took, and not much more,' Keig added.

'I dare say I know why things are different,' I said. 'It had crossed my mind to wonder where the money came from for all the whiskey I saw being sold in Lesneven. As I remember in the old days we only just balanced imports and exports.'

'Whatever the way of it,' Keig said, 'there's one thing certain: gold goes on that train once a week just in time to catch the steamer.'

And a consignment of the withdrawn gold coin Keig proposed to hijack. They were not, he claimed, all that well guarded. When the little train to Portharnel had gold on board there travelled in the guard's van just one Watchman to protect it. Presumably whoever was responsible for its security relied on very few people knowing any gold was being taken out of the island at all, especially as this was hardly the sort of thing Mr Mylchraine would want to have

widely talked about. Consequently the task of guarding it had been left simply to the official island police, the much despised Watch, to the resentment, according to Keig, of the Keepers, whose dissatisfied comments he had chanced to overhear.

I had little doubt that no one else from the chain-gang had any idea of all this: Keig had stood out from the others when I had watched them at work as being the only one of them all with time and strength of mind enough to look about him.

At this point he questioned me, with slow obstinacy, about what I knew of the country through which the single-track railway ran. Gradually from my memory of the few times I had been on the train I was able to piece together quite a reasonable account of the route. And soon it appeared that there was one section of it highly suitable for our purpose. For almost all the last five miles of its twenty-mile run the railway went along a narrow gorge cutting through the hills that bordered the coast, the same gorge which on reaching the sea became the deep and narrow inlet that provides Oceana's sole anchorage for sea-going vessels of any size. It would not be difficult somewhere there to fell one of the fir-trees that clamber up the gorge sides and block the line. Once the train was halted it would be up to us.

Were the Watchmen who provided the guard armed, I asked Keig. There was, it seemed, only one of them, an elderly fellow, who invariably had this duty and, though he brought along a carbine each time he came, he always stowed it away in the guard's van with the utmost care as if this was what he was there to protect.

We refined somewhat on the plan when shortly after midday we actually reached our chosen area, after a cautious journey across country, interrupted for sessions of

solemn blayberry cramming whenever we came across any of the frequent patches of them which Oceana farmers are careful to leave in the corners of their fields.

We were able to select when it came down to detailed planning a Particularly good stretch of the railway where the trees grew close to the line just after it had taken an especially sharp bend. We calculated that the engine-driver and his fireman would be so busy avoiding hitting the tree across their path that they would have no time to see Keig and myself sprint from cover to the guard's van. And we also came across a moderately large sapling that had been uprooted in a gale at some time and decided to use this rather than a more giveaway felled tree.

There was little more to do after making these decisions than to push and roll our selected tree to a slightly better position ready for the final moment. There was even time to make an expedition to the nearest point on the coast to look for a likely boat for our escape to the steamer, and indeed to locate one with scarcely any trouble. Then all we had to do was to hide in the woods and wait till Friday came round again and with it the weekly departure of the steamer and the weekly despatch of another instalment of Oceana's gold to the outside world.

That night we ate a rabbit which Keig had snared and Margaret cooked spitted on a stick over a careful little fire.

Smoothly though such preparations as we had made had gone, I cannot pretend I was happy about the whole idea of the robbery. For one thing it all seemed too simple. We had done nothing. We had picked out with some care, it was true, the best place for our attempt and we had gone to a little trouble to get a suitable tree for blocking the line into the best position. But, beyond a certain amount of

discussion of what role each of us would play in the actual business when it came to it, we had done nothing more.

Not that, lying awake in the aromatic fir woods at night, I had not racked my brains to think of more that we could usefully do. And had been totally unsuccessful.

Only over the final part of our plan was I really comfortable. Once out at sea, I thought, we were pretty likely to be safe: the steamer crew, anti-Mylchraine to a man, would be only too ready to help us, and ever since the end of World War Two Oceana's tiny volunteer Local Defence Force had lost even the pair of launches it had possessed in those excited, strictly neutral days.

But the whole idea of the robbery itself never ceased for me to seem like a pure pipe-dream, simply the product of Keig's state of euphoria after his success in finally throwing off the Keepers' hunt. But Friday came and his attitude had not changed.

At the exact time we had decided on we went down and tipped our prepared fir-tree across the line. It fell a little short, but it was clear that it would be quite enough to halt the train. Then Keig and I walked back to our pre-arranged ambush point, and Margaret went to a nearby crag from where she was to signal when she saw the train coming.

And then we waited.

Much at the time we had expected Margaret waved her orangey-red shawl in the agreed signal. I tensed myself for the dash forward, but uselessly. It would be three or four minutes at least before the train would round the bend just beside us.

After two of those minutes had gone by we heard the sound of the engine. It grew steadily louder. Then the train came noisily round the corner into our view. It was not going very fast. It looked, as it had done when I had gone to

Lesneven in it eight days earlier, quaint and rather jolly. A lot of steam puffed out from all sorts of places on the engine.

A moment later the driver must have seen our tree. We heard the brakes go on in a gradually rising squeal.

‘Now,’ Keig barked, just before the train came to a standstill.

We shot up from the bush where we had crouched only a couple of yards from the line and pelted as fast as we could go towards the train about thirty yards ahead, Keig clutching his axe and jerking it up and down as he ran. Under our feet the pineneedle-covered earth was soft and silent. We had calculated that coming up in this way none of the few passengers on board was likely to see or even hear us.

At the guard’s van we swung up, one on either side as we had arranged, opened the half-doors to left and right of the rear observation section and got in. Neither the guard, leaning out on my side but looking up front to see what the trouble was, nor the Watchman on Keig’s side appeared to have noticed us at all.

A narrow sliding door barred off the main closed section of the van, and, besides a deep wooden locker under the open rear window, there was nothing else in the whole observation section. Keig flipped at the top lid of the locker with one hand. It opened easily. He took a quick look inside.

‘Empty,’ he said.

Already I was trying the sliding door, my mind excitedly leaping ahead in the curious fairytale atmosphere in which the whole event seemed to be taking place.

In keeping with the unreal smoothness of everything, I found the door completely unsecured. It rolled sideways as I

tugged at it. Keig slipped through the gap, twisting his broad shoulders to get in fast enough.

It was gloomily dark in the wholly-enclosed centre section of the van, and for a moment or so after I had entered at Keig's heels I stood blinking hard and wondering how we were ever going to see the gold even if it was here. But already Keig was moving rapidly from pile to pile of the few pieces of goods and baggage disposed here and there on the floor, and within seconds my eyes got equally accustomed to the gloom and I was able to make out at least the shapes and sizes of things.

Hardly had I done so when Keig straightened up.

'Not in here,' he whispered close to my ear.

It was what I had already begun to think. The gold, if Keig was right about it, should be in two quite small black leather cases. That was the amount that went each week, never less, never more. And nothing like that was to be seen here.

Keig took my elbow and steered me over to a second sliding door, the one leading to the front observation section of the van from which we had seen guard and Watchman peering perplexedly forward. He stationed me, as we had agreed, on the left-hand side.

I saw him get himself ready, taking a fresh grip on his axe and crouching slightly in front of the door. He gave me a quick nod.

I tugged sharply at the door. It did not budge an inch.

I pulled again, with both hands. Still the door stayed obstinately closed.

'Locked,' I muttered, all my happy excitement ebbing instantly away at the check.

I stood for a little in blank dismay. Then I came to life and started forward for the rear door. I am not sure of my

motive: I may have been simply going to run for it, or I may have developed a sort of frenzied determination to take the lead in going round the van and attempting a frontal assault on its two occupants.

I never discovered which. Keig shot out his hand and grabbed my arm.

‘Wait,’ he hissed. ‘Keep still.’

I stood there like a statue.

And after a few moments the sounds of the afternoon began to penetrate into the half darkness of the closed compartment. In the distance I heard the train’s engine puffing quietly to itself. Then there was the nearer sound of faint voices calling out queryingly. And finally there was even some birdsong.

We both of us stood still listening hard. And it dawned on me that, of course, no one had the faintest idea that Keig and I were on the train at all.

Then we heard new voices, much closer. The guard and the Watchman.

‘Looks like a tree.’

‘What? On the line?’

‘That’s what it looks like.’

‘That’s queer. Wasn’t no wind last night. I know. I was awake half the time with that old arthritis of mine.’

‘Think I’ll go along, see if I can give ‘em a hand.’

Keig’s hand tightened a little on my arm.

‘Want me to come?’ the Watchman’s voice said next-door to us.

I held my breath.

‘No,’ the guard replied. ‘You stay where you are. I’ll give you a shout if there’s anything to do.’

We listened yet harder.

There was a jarring sound on the side of the van.
Evidently someone getting down.

Had I left the half-door on my side swinging open? I couldn't remember.

But it seemed there was nothing unusual to be seen because almost at once we heard the sound of tramping feet slipping and sliding on the loose stones of the permanent way as they receded into the distance. Keig's hand was still tight on my arm.

We waited what seemed an interminable time, though it turned out to be just long enough for the guard to get up towards the front of the train. Then Keig took his hand off me and crept over to the open rear door. He went through on tiptoe. I followed.

Cautiously Keig put his head a little way out of the window on one side. And quickly flicked it in again.

He leant towards me.

'He's looking out that side,' he whispered in a voice I could hardly hear. 'The Watchman. We'll creep round the other way.'

He left me and went across to the half-door on the opposite side. Slowly he eased it open, peered round and then jumped down. I went across ready to follow him. He was standing well clear of the track and as soon as he saw me he signalled vigorously that I was to do what he had done, jump over the stones of the permanent way on to the soft earth on the far side. I launched myself and landed, with what seemed an appalling thump, beside Keig.

At once he turned and led the way towards the front of the guard's van. I set off behind him.

I think had I been given a moment to consider my situation I would not have been able to move. But there was no time at all, and two seconds later I found myself beside Keig looking into the forward observation section and at the blue-uniformed back of the white-haired Watchman.

And just at that moment he turned round.

I suppose it was because there was no more to see up at the front. But whatever the reason it left him staring the pair of us straight in the eye.

He did not say a word. But it must have been quite clear to him that we were not a couple of passengers who had simply come back to ask what the trouble was. We must have looked, in fact, a pretty pair of villains. Neither of us had shaved for a week—a lack which Keig had grumbled about every single morning—and we had been sleeping every night in our clothes, which in any case were considerably the worse for long immersion in sea-water. And Keig was holding, in a decidedly menacing way, his long-handled axe.

For a short time the Watchman simply looked at us and we looked at him. Then he quickly dipped two fingers into the lower right-hand pocket of his blue-uniformed waistcoat and from it produced a stubby key on the end of the brass chain which looped across his dignified little belly.

I thought that he must somehow know what it was we had come for and was simply going to open the locker beside him and hand over the two black cases. I believe the same unlikely thought was in Keig's mind as well because he made no move at all to rush the van while the Watchman's attention was not fully on us.

But it was not the gold that came out of the opened locker. It was the Watchman's carbine.

The Watchman was elderly and should have been retired long ago no doubt, and I do not suppose he had had to move fast for years. But he certainly moved quickly enough at this moment, and before either of us down beside the track had so much as taken a pace forward he was pointing the short-barrelled wooden-stocked weapon fairly and squarely towards us.

I felt nothing but a boiling sense of rage against Keig. I had known all along that he was going to overreach himself. And now he had.

I do not know for how long I stood there under the steadily-held carbine and felt fury towards Keig go swirling through my head, certain now I had been right to doubt him over the business of crossing to the Kernel in the lighter. It had been sheer luck and nothing more that we had got out of that mess intact. And now he had done the same thing again. Blasted, cocky axe-twirler.

Filled to complete self-absorption with these thoughts, I did not at first realize that Keig was talking to the Watchman. I blinked, and the meaning of the words just said sank in.

‘Put down that gun.’

My eyes were fixed on the old man.

He shook his head slightly from side to side.

‘Now it’s no use you trying anything,’ he said. ‘I know the sort you are. I’ve been expecting something like this for months. But they wouldn’t listen.’

Old he undoubtedly was. But he spoke with plenty of determination. There was a faint stubble of snow-white hair on his pink clean-shaven face.

‘Put down that gun,’ Keig repeated.

‘No.’

‘Then I’m coming to take it off you.’

An absolute chill seemed to strike simultaneously at every part of my body. Feet, hands, back, head, all went cold on that summer afternoon at exactly the same moment.

I was going to see Keig shot down. I knew it. I had in that very instant altogether forgotten my rage. All I remembered was the qualities that had drawn me to him in the first place, qualities I had apprehended even across a distance of yards, even in the few moments I had watched him at work in the chain-gang—uncowedness, simple independence, rightness. I was going to see those shot down.

I did not dare do otherwise than keep my eyes fixed hard on the old Watchman. I willed him to drop the gun. But I knew he would not. I seemed to register the whole of the man in those seconds that I looked at him, and I knew he had spent a lifetime doing his duty and meant to go on doing it to the end.

I realized that a movement had taken place by my side. Keig had stepped forward. I saw the short barrel of the carbine move a little away from me till it was pointing straight at Keig. And I saw now out of the corner of my eye that Keig was still moving forward. A second step. A third. He was three yards away from the Watchman now, if that.

Now Keig stretched out the hand that was not holding his axe and hauled himself up on to the van. And then he reached forward over the half-door and took the carbine out of the white-haired Watchman’s hands.

I thought I heard the old fellow give a single sob.

‘I never had to shoot a man in all my service,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t do it when it came to it, not in cold blood.’

Keig turned away from him and called back to me.

‘Come up sharp now. We’ll need to tie him up.’

One of the minor points we had agreed on earlier was that before the ambush I should take off my tie and have it ready in my pocket in case we had to secure anybody. It seemed a long time ago that we had talked about the possibility.

I moved forward, refusing to let myself think about anything but the details of the business in hand. I pulled the tie out and used it to bind the old man's arms behind his back. As I did so Keig burrowed into the already open locker. He pulled from it first one and then another black leather bag. It was plain they were both very heavy.

'Right,' he said to me. 'Fast as you can.'

This again was one of our pre-arranged alternative plans. If we got the gold without much fuss we had fixed on a route we would escape by designed to give us the maximum advantage over any pursuers. I took one of the black cases and dropped down with it on to the track-side. Keig picked up his axe again and followed me with the other case. We set off at a good pace into the sheltering woods. The leather bag I carried was extraordinarily heavy but I managed to keep up a pretty good speed till we reached the spot where we had constructed a hiding place for the gold. It took less than a minute to plunge both bags deep into the hole we had made and cover them with earth and pine-needles. And then we were off again, unimpeded.

We did hear some faint cries from people coming after us. But it took them a good deal longer than we had counted on to realize what had happened and begin a pursuit. They never stood a chance of getting anywhere near us.

It was about a couple of hours later, after the three of us had watched from a distance the train to Portharnel at last resume its journey and while we were disinterring the black bags from their hiding place, that abruptly I felt able to think again.

‘That old chap,’ I blurted out. ‘He’ll never feel the same about himself again, you know. He’s done for.’

Keig looked up from where he was kneeling, spading out the soft earth with his hands.

‘When you set off to fight someone like Mylchraine,’ he said, ‘a lot of people are likely to get hurt by the way. That’s something I hadn’t altogether reckoned on.’

I had been expecting him once he had got the gold up to indulge in another of his childish axe-dances of victory. He did not.

Part Two

1

It proved to be only forty-eight hours after that unexpectedly sombre moment which set the seal on our interception of Mr Mylchraine's gold that I found myself escorting Keig through the Dublin streets—apparently more intimidating to him than the tensions of our departure from Oceana in a creakingly slow rowing-boat—as we made our way to Caveen's Bar, the place where the Revolutionary Council of Oceana used to gather under the protection of a landlord born in the island. Here the Council secretary, a man called Cormode, had suggested we meet when I had contacted him from Cobh after the steamer had docked. I had interviewed him in the same place ten days earlier getting background for my island-dictatorship story. That seemed a world away now.

At the entrance I glanced back at Keig. What impression would he make? He stood there half a pace behind me, still in the clothes he had changed into on his last visit to his home. On the steamer he had managed to spruce them up and had also, after some almost feverish inquiry, borrowed a razor. But he still looked just exactly what he was: a smallholder from the depths of the country, scarf knotted round his bull-neck, moleskin trousers shiny at the knees and well-worn brown tweed jacket. I had persuaded him to leave his axe at the little hotel where we had booked in with Margaret, but in either hand he held with ham-fists tight clenched the two heavy black leather bags that contained the gold. With simple directness he had brought them to hand over straight away.

What would the Revolutionary Council, those insatiable plotters and planners, make of him?

I pushed at a door with its opaque glass panel fancifully inscribed with whirling patterns round the single word 'Snug'. And as I had expected, there they were, some fifteen of them all told sitting crowded together in the tiny dark-panelled room. There was Cormode, the one who kept things going, a thin shortish man of about forty-five with a big pointed nose, deep blazingly waspish eyes and pale indoor cheeks, and Fayrhare, the ex-British Navy lieutenant-commander, dark and handsome, the Council's sea-warfare expert, with balancing him their military man, a former Irish Army signals sergeant called Jack Ascough, sandy-haired and with a sandy moustache set in a freckled face. The only other one I could put a name to was Willine, Clifford Willine, poet of the dissident Oceanans, his long sharp knife of a face always ready with a bitter remark.

Marshall Tear, chairman of the Council, former headmaster of Brignogan School, acknowledged leader of the exiles, was not there. It was, from what I knew of him, to be expected. He liked to hold a little aloof. He would arrive when the first flurry of greetings was over.

But now the excitement was upon us in full flood. The moment they saw me at the door, everyone in the room, it seemed, jumped up and hurried forward. Eyes were shining, voices were suddenly raised. This was a great day for Oceana.

Cormode seized my hand and shook it time and again. I introduced Keig, who in turn allowed his great fist to be pumped up and down.

'Pleased to meet you,' he said, managing to get the corners of his mouth up into a definite smile.

Then the others came up and I introduced some of them and Cormode introduced the rest. There were shouts of

‘Congratulations’ and ‘That’ll teach Mr Mylchraine’ and people started slapping each other on the back as if the success had somehow been Partly of their own making.

‘A drink,’ Cormode shouted. ‘Someone get two doubles for the heroes of Free Oceana.’

A moment later glasses were being passed from hand to hand towards us. They took some time in coming, and I could see that Cormode, as he mouthed more congratulations, was already working out how this new element in exiled Oceanan politics was going to fit in. Nor did it take him long to decide. Just as the drink arrived he looked at Keig and offered him stout in place of whiskey. In his book the newcomer was to be the rough country simpleton, the slow plodding force unused to the wider ways of the world.

‘No, this will do grand,’ Keig said, snatching at the whiskey glass with an expression of sudden resoluteness.

‘I give you a toast then,’ Cormode called out. ‘To the downfall of the tyrant Mylchraine.’

I was looking at Keig closely as a nursemaid watching her charge perform its first curtsey and I saw that the glass when he set it down on the green-tiled table in front of him was almost as full as when he had been given it. Was he nothing of a drinking man? There were many aspects of him I had not yet encountered.

A great to-do followed over ordering another round. The Oceanans, generally eking out a whole evening of political discussion on a single bottle of stout, were evidently in finely careless holiday mood.

And soon the glass-panelled door was opened wide and Marshall Tear strode in.

He was a commanding figure, no doubt about that. A good six foot tall, he had a great mane of whitish-grey hair

and a long, full, gravely handsome face, the skin slightly deadened with age. He would be then in his late fifties, perhaps just sixty. He wore a dark blue suit, old but well-cut, a plain white shirt—very fresh looking—and a plain blue tie. He would have photographed well.

Everybody had risen to their feet again. He gave us all a remote smile. Cormode hurried forward and introduced Keig and myself. Then, when Tear had seated himself in the place clearly regularly reserved for him, he invited us to tell our story.

I took the task on myself and made a thorough job of it, taking good care to leave it clear who had planned the undertaking and had been its leading spirit. I was not going to have Cormode and his like belittling Keig.

Marshall Tear certainly appeared to get the message. At the end of my recital he leant forward in his chair.

‘Mr Keig,’ he said, ‘I want you to know that I myself, like every single one of us in this room, have nothing but the highest admiration for your daring and resource.’

Keig shifted uneasily on the chair that looked so frail under him.

Tear looked all round as if the small assembly was a mighty crowd beneath him.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘from this moment Mr Keig is a member of the Revolutionary Council.’

There was a patter of applause.

‘I think, sir,’ Cormode broke in, easily silencing the sound, ‘that we are not in fact a properly constituted meeting. Of course—’

A cold light had come into Tear’s eyes.

‘I hardly think this is an occasion for the minutiae of protocol, Cormode,’ he said. ‘Mr Keig is appointed on my

authority.'

'Of course, sir.'

Tear stayed on only long enough to consolidate, so to speak, this small victory. When he left it seemed to me that the atmosphere loosened up considerably, and soon I was busy with various people elaborating on what I had told them earlier. So it was some time before I noticed that Keig, who had taken a minimal part in the talk, had risen from his chair. I was at that moment closely engaged with Commander Fayrhare—very keen to know if there had been anything said in the island about Mr Mylchraine's Keepers acquiring sea-going craft—but I was able to see Cormode go quickly over.

'Now what about another drink?' I heard him say.

'No,' said Keig, almost vehemently.

And then he added a painfully obvious concession to politeness.

'Thank you all the same, but I'm away now.'

I excused myself reluctantly from Fayrhare, who was a nice, serious, straightforward man, and made my way across.

'I must go too,' I said to Cormode. 'The prospect of a bed with sheets on it is beginning to seem extraordinarily attractive.'

'Yes, yes,' said Keig. 'Yes, we must get some sleep. And there's my wife. She'll be fradgeting.'

At the door Cormode laid his fingers on Keig's sleeve.

'One more thing,' he said, 'where is the gold actually?'

Keig looked at him.

'Here,' he said, picking up his two heavy black leather bags.

‘Good gracious,’ Cormode said, ‘have you been carrying it round with you?’

‘Where else would it be safe?’ Keig asked.

Cormode smiled, without warmth.

‘Well, I suggest a bank deposit box,’ he answered. ‘I was arranging for one this afternoon as a matter of fact. I’ll call for you in the morning and we can put it safely away.’

‘No,’ Keig said.

Cormode blinked.

‘Er—Well, when shall I come then?’

Keig looked at him unsmilingly.

‘I prefer to keep it myself for the time being,’ he said.

The judger had been judged.

Nor did Keig ever put the gold into the keeping of the Revolutionary Council. That first encounter proved to be an accurate foretaste of his relations with the established leaders of the exiles during all the time he spent in Dublin. For the first few months he attended every meeting of the Council, for which Cormode, a punctilious secretary, sent him badly duplicated agendas. But from what I gathered he never said very much and soon I realized that he was going to them not with the idea of contributing anything, and certainly not to be obstructionist—a pleasure which seemed wholly to consume some of the members—but to make up his mind about the men heading the struggle against Mr Mylchraine.

And, as meeting followed meeting during that summer and autumn, Keig, I could well see from the quick dismissive frown that appeared on his broad brow whenever I mentioned names, crossed off in his mind one by one every single member of the Council. Only Marshall Tear, who

seldom attended the meetings on the grounds that detail work was Cormode's task, escaped.

Keig himself told me very little of what went on in the Council. I had been judged too, I knew, and relegated to the role of mere useful informant on certain subjects, for all that I continued to see a good deal of him in the evenings after he had finished the navvying job he had taken and I my clerk's work. I had no difficulty however in learning about the Council's deliberations: the incessant gossip that riddled the whole exile movement saw to that.

In this way I learnt that the Council, for all Keig's unyielding dismissals of its members, was not idle. Decisions were taken and action initiated. It was agreed to start a newspaper. And some time in October a public meeting was held to raise funds, in of all places a hall attached to a Swedenborgian chapel which in those days led a declining life somewhere amid the tumbledown elegance of the North Side of the city.

The place when Keig and I entered seemed strongly redolent of steaming raincoat. Looking down at the hard-gossiping, damp gathering were two high rows of plaster busts, yellowing and dust-capped, noble and anonymous, the most lifelessly ideal contemplating the real at its least lovable. Keig tramped me through the crowd to sit up on the platform with the rest of the Council—raised eyebrows from Clifford Willine, the poet—and soon an elderly former Delegate to the Rota called Abraham Skillicorne was opening the meeting. I remember Cormode made a long speech explaining the projected *Voice of Oceana* and that it put a mass of financial complexities with admirable clarity. Its closing words I can quote almost exactly.

'But of course, my friends, all this will be slow work. We cannot make the immediate impact on world opinion which we ought to make, which we are here to make, without a

large opening deposit. You need one big stake to start you off.'

It was then that I realized what the main purpose of the whole meeting was: to get Keig to cough up.

No doubt the hat would be passed round and a certain amount raised. Perhaps the Council did have enough in hand to make a beginning, though exact sums had carefully not been mentioned. But the chief object, I saw, was to bring all the pressure of opinion Cormode could muster to push Keig into declaring that the gold he was clinging to was at the Council's disposition.

Quietly I eased myself round in my chair till I had Keig in full view. The broad face with its brow-hidden eyes maintained the old impassive expression which somehow recalled to me the quiet fields of remote Oceana and gave no sign of comprehending what was happening.

Then Abraham Skillicorne called for questions, and the usual embarrassed silence followed. I saw Keig shift a little on his chair and thought he was about to ask something himself. But he remained seated. And I remembered that in all probability he had never actually seen so many people as the two hundred odd here assembled together in one place before. To get up and put a question in front of them all would be a decided ordeal.

An elderly man with straggly white hair eventually stood up and asked in a strained squeaky voice 'whether room would be found in the new journal for the art of poetry'.

Keig's quick frown flickered over his face. Clifford Willine, who had been announced as the paper's editor, serpentine eagerly to his feet.

'Mr Chairman, may I say that there certainly will be room. For what has more power to terrify the tyrant and to totter thrones than the sharp and divine tongue of poetry?'

Vigorous applause from some sections of the hall. Willine sat down, a smile curving his long knife of a face.

And then Keig was on his feet. I thought his dark complexion was plainly a degree darker than usual.

‘The smuggling,’ he blurted out. ‘How’s that to be done?’

Cormode turned to him, genuinely puzzled I thought.

‘The smuggling?’ he asked cautiously. ‘I don’t think I quite understand.’

‘If this paper’s to do any good,’ Keig replied, looking fixedly at Cormode, ‘it’s got to be read by the people Mylchraine’s fattening himself on. How’s it to be got to them? You never said much about that.’

Cormode smiled a little.

‘To tell you the truth,’ he said, ‘we haven’t had time to go into that more than cursorily. But I have no doubt we shall get copies to the island without too much trouble. There’s the weekly steamer and so forth.’

‘All this business won’t go far to finish Mylchraine if that’s the best we can do,’ Keig said.

He sat down lumpily. There was no applause.

Willine leant across towards him, eyes bright with malice.

‘But tell us, Mr Keig,’ he said, ‘what would you do as something better than awakening the conscience of the world to Mr Mylchraine’s tyranny?’

It was silly of him. Keig rose to his feet like a steam-hammer.

‘I’ll tell you what I’d do,’ he roared. ‘I’d get out there into the hills and I’d start doing some military drill.’

There was a long moment of silence. And then someone sitting near the straggly-haired old man who had asked about poetry began to titter. The reaction caught on. In

seconds there was laughter everywhere. I sat absolutely still, my eyes fixed on Keig. He lowered himself down again slowly and let the laughter echo round him. His face was perfectly calm. I gave him full marks.

Someone brushed past me. I glanced up and saw it was Donald Fayrhare, apparently in a great hurry. I looked over at Cormode to see what was up. He was watching the tall ex-sailor go down the hall with an expression of sharp anxiety. But the moment that he noticed I was looking he resumed his public-meeting expression of unvarying courteous interest.

Skillicorne was on his feet now, shushing the laughter with spreading movements of his large hands. Other questions, mostly lamentably silly, were asked. But it was plain Cormode's main purpose had foundered: Keig was hardly going to make a big gesture now.

And then a flurry of movement at the entrance doors caught my eye. I turned and saw the tall, grey-haired, impressive figure of Marshall Tear. Fayrhare was hovering behind him, and I guessed then what the astute Cormode had done. He had sent for his strategically-placed reinforcements.

By now most people in the hall had also spotted Tear and as he began to walk up towards the platform someone started to clap. By the time he had taken his place everybody was applauding for all they were worth. And you could tell why. Tear was a magnetic figure. He had the gift of standing quite still, doing nothing and saying nothing and yet concentrating all attention upon himself.

Then he began to speak. His words were banal enough, something about a force being generated to hurl the tyrant from his seat. But they brought a deep baying approval. At once he seemed to have lifted the whole occasion up on to

another, altogether higher plane. And then, almost as if he was milking a roaring lioness, he altered his note.

‘Let me go back,’ he said almost crooningly, ‘let me go back and recall for you a quiet day in our beloved island some fifteen years ago. Not a very remarkable day, the occasion of a peaceful and simple ceremony, the annual prizegiving at Brignogan School.’

He gave a gentle smile.

‘There had been,’ he said, ‘if I recall aright, blayberries and cream somewhere about. And now it was time for me as headmaster to say a few words. I chose as my theme something often in my mind in those days still within the orbit of a war that had ravaged the civilized world. I spoke about democracy. I tried to plant in the minds of those of my pupils who had just reached the end of their schooldays one last hard seed of belief: belief in the virtue of a people ruling themselves.’

In that dank Dublin October afternoon I really believe everyone listening was at that moment in Lesneven, under a deep blue summer sky, with the sharp odour of fresh blayberries in the air, hearing that other speech.

‘I hope,’ Tear went on, ‘that my words were listened to, that the seed I tried to plant is still, here and there, attempting to grow to the light.’

He lifted up his head under the mane of grey hair.

‘I know that my words were indeed listened to in one quarter,’ he said more sharply. ‘Because just one week later I received a letter from the Board of Governors, a body to which a certain Rolph Mylchraine had recently been co-opted. It took specific exception to my raising “a matter of politics” in a speech in my official capacity.’

Tear paused till every ear was doubly strained.

‘My friends, in that hour tyranny began in Oceana.’

There was a long murmur of released emotion.

‘Yes,’ Tear said, ‘I truly believe that such was the small beginning of the terrible troubles that have come to our beloved country. I will not burden you with the rapid progress things took from that point, how I was forced to resign, how I found all other possible posts in the island barred to me till, sick with disgust and despair, I sought refuge on these hospitable shores.’

He paused, perhaps looking back on the day he arrived in Dublin, penniless, jobless, with little hope. In complete silence every pair of eyes in the hall watched him. The whitish-grey mane of hair was bent as if to receive yet more blows of fate. The lined grave face was sombre. Then it lifted with an air of challenge, wearily taken up, and he made his own appeal for funds for the new paper.

If there had been applause before it was doubled and trebled by the time he had come to an end. I never thought to see an Oceanan audience, which even when made up of rebels is likely to contain a good half of stolid citizens, go so wild.

I turned to Keig.

He was sitting with his face as expressionless as those of the yellowed plaster busts on the walls. Yet it was plain he was in some way affected by it all. He was shifting about again on his chair and his hands were gripping hard at its seat. I even saw a sheen of sweat on the hairy backs of them.

It must have been nearly ten minutes before the noise subsided, and people, realizing that nothing could cap what they had just heard, began to stand up, opening wallets and purses and talking excitedly.

‘Wait. Wait. There’s something I want to say.’

It was Keig. He was on his feet, bellowing.

An uneasy silence rippled over the audience. Already it was plain to all of them that this was something out of key. I saw that Keig was digging his fingernails into the palms of his hands till the muscles bulged in the arms of his badly-fitting tight brown tweed jacket.

‘You won’t do it by words,’ he said, jerking the syllables out towards the still standing figure of Marshall Tear.

He took a quick gulp of breath.

‘It’s Mylchraine. You don’t understand him. He—He’s—The man is—He’s bad.’

Suddenly the word he really wanted came to him.

‘That man is evil,’ he blurted out. ‘He is an evil man. He’s not one of the ones you get rid of by words. He wants what he has too much for words to shift him. He wants—’

Again there came the terrible, horribly embarrassing pause.

‘He wants to give orders,’ he said at last, shaking his head in bafflement as he realized he had failed to hit on the proper term.

‘He wants to tell people what to do—and to have them do it. To rule. To be boss, over everyone. And he’s got it now. And you won’t get that away from him with all your words and writings, no matter how many of them.’

He turned from Tear and took a long look at the crowded hall, forcing himself to it. And then he jabbed out one more blocked, halting, yet strong jet of black warning.

‘If you want to stop that man you’ve got to be as hard with him as he’d be with you. If you want to get rid of Mylchraine you’ll have to kill him.’

There was a shocked gasp from the hall. Words which are not said had been spoken. Keig, for all the effort of concentration he was having to make just to get out his

words, was hit by the wave of affrontedness that swept up to us. He stopped and began again.

‘That—Oh, yes, to kill him. There’s the trouble with all of you. You like to sit here in Dublin and dream of the day when Mylchraine vanishes away. But Mylchraine isn’t the sort to vanish: he’s the sort to feed. To feed himself on those who can’t get away from him. And he’s got to be pulled off his feed. And you won’t do that by stroking his back. You won’t finish Mylchraine till you kill him. That’s all.’

He sat down abruptly. I heard the chair give one loud creak under his weight.

For some time there was a silence below us. Then a little clapping, spasmodically here and there, and a great deal of sharp whispering. And at last someone began heaving himself into a damp mackintosh.

It was a signal. Before many minutes the little hall would be left to the unseeing gaze of the two rows of dust-crowned yellowing busts whose plaster brains would never be troubled with the barbed question that Keig had thrust into our minds.

2

Keig and I left the Swedenborgians' hall without doing more than nod at the Council members busy receiving donations. It was still raining when we stepped outside.

'Are you going home?' I asked Keig.

'Yes,' he answered. 'Margaret'll have tea waiting.'

I felt a twinge of envy. There was a warmth of comfortable familiarity in the remark, while I had felt inhibited as a fairly poverty-stricken spare-time revolutionary publicity-officer from acquiring in Dublin the sort of semi-permanent girl-friend I had had in London.

Keig walked off and I stood there in the rain, feeling the onset of acute depression. Then suddenly Peter Cormode came hurrying out of the hall and looked quickly up and down the street.

'Mr Keig, Mr Keig,' he called. 'Just a word.'

He began running along the slippery gleaming pavement, and I set off after him with my curiosity pricklingly aroused. Soon Keig heard his shouts and turned. Cormode went up to him, a slight figure against Keig's great width of shoulder although both were much of a height.

'I've got a request to make,' I heard him say.

'Yes?' Keig answered.

Cormode, runnels of rainwater trickling down on either side of his large pointed nose, looked Keig straight in the eye.

‘Mr Keig,’ he said. ‘I’ve come to admit that what you said in there was right. And if I undertake to press that view both in and out of Council, will you in turn release gold to finance *The Voice of Oceana*?’

I felt a swift leap of elation. So, in spite of all appearances, Keig had actually converted Cormode to his tough truth. The others would follow soon enough. It was a remarkable feat.

And I found, too, that I had a new admiration for Cormode. It would take not a little moral courage to admit that someone as uncouth as Keig was right and oneself wrong.

‘Mr Cormode,’ Keig answered, after a long pause. ‘You’ll get that gold soon enough—on the day you tell me you know of a boat that’ll put a hundred fighting men into Oceana.’

He swung on his heel and marched off. I stood hesitating. I did not want by staying where I was to seem to be acknowledging Cormode was right, but Keig’s abruptness had certainly jarred. In the end I set off at a run after Keig. After all, I was on his side.

Catching him up I searched for a remark to make, though I might have known even then that Keig was never one to expect mere conversation.

‘What did you think of Marshall Tear?’ I said. ‘I’d no idea he could handle a crowd so well. You know, he could move thousands, literally thousands. Get them to follow him through thick and thin.’

I was not even certain Keig had been listening, so firmly had he strode on through the rain, eyes down. But he had heard all right. He jerked round to me.

‘That voice of Tear’s,’ he said. ‘If we don’t watch out, it’ll land us and him into real trouble one day.’

I felt a surge of fury. This was going too far. Even if he just had single-handedly implanted the notion that the whole revolutionary movement up to now had failed because it lacked the daring really to tackle Mylchraine, did that make him right about everything? Wasn't it sheer recklessness of judgment to dismiss Tear like that?

I muttered a goodbye and plunged off down the first turning that presented itself.

Yet now the exiles, after fifteen years of looking at Oceana from a distance, began at last to take steps to prepare for an invasion of the island. And one evening in Caveen's Bar I was taken mysteriously aside by old Abraham Skillicorne.

There had just been a Council meeting in a room upstairs and I was waiting for Keig, whom I now saw coming in engaged somewhat surprisingly in conversation with Clifford Willine. Hardly about poetry, I thought as I turned to Skillicorne.

'What can I do for you?' I asked. 'I'm in a bit of a hurry: I said I'd walk back with Keig.'

'Ah yes, Keig,' Skillicorne replied, putting a wealth of meaning into the name, though exactly what meaning it was hard to decide.

'Well?' I said.

'There was something I wanted to tell you, my dear chap. Just between ourselves—for the time being.'

A great one for laying out guide-lines was Abraham Skillicorne. Doubtless if I was patient enlightenment would follow. Over his shoulder I could see Keig still with Willine. He looked a bit put out and was shaking his head mulishly. What was Willine asking?

'This invasion, as we call it,' Skillicorne said softly in my ear. 'We were discussing that this evening, you know.'

‘Yes. Keig was there. He only goes if that’s on the agenda.’

Skillicorne smiled his watery smile.

‘One had drawn that conclusion, yes.’

Then I saw what the trouble was between Keig and Willine. Willine was pressing Keig to have a whiskey, and Keig, who carefully never took more than one glass of stout for a whole evening, was refusing. Somewhat boorishly. But then it looked as if he was after all accepting.

I discovered Skillicorne had quietly been adding another item to his carefully built-up preamble.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I didn’t quite catch that.’

‘Ah.’

Another smile.

‘I was simply saying that we had even got to the point of reaching a decision.’

‘Oh yes?’

‘Yes. We have solemnly fixed on a date. A day for the invasion, no less.’

Keig, I now saw, had succeeded in disposing of the whiskey Willine had given him after half-emptying it. He had slipped it behind a briefcase propped near by. But the move had done little good. One of Willine’s cronies was now busy persuading him to have another. I caught the suddenly raised voice.

‘Too damned proud to drink with us ordinary folk.’

I would have liked to have gone to the rescue, but I had to hear old Skillicorne out.

‘Now, my dear fellow,’ he was going on again, ‘there’s to be another Council meeting tomorrow. The pace is hotting up, you know.’

‘And you want me to make sure Keig is there?’

‘No, not quite that. Though it’s good of you to offer.’

Damn. Keig had taken the second whiskey.

‘No, what I had to propose, my dear fellow, was something a little different.’

‘Yes?’

‘It was simply that you should look in on the meeting yourself.’

I was certain now the business round Keig was a nasty little joke of Willine’s. I answered Skillicorne abstractedly.

‘Me, to be there? But why?’

‘You can manage it? There’s no prior engagement? No lady in the case? We’re meeting at nine p.m. Up at Commander Fayrhare’s house. For reasons of security.’

Was he laughing at the idea of ‘security’? He should not: there was little enough of it.

‘No, I’m free,’ I said.

Yes, Willine was now lifting up the briefcase hiding Keig’s first whiskey and was laughingly insisting on him finishing it.

‘Look,’ I said to Skillicorne, ‘I’ll come if you want me, but you’ll hardly need publicity.’

He gave my arm a swift squeeze.

‘No. No publicity.’

And abruptly he left me. I plunged over towards Keig.

But I was too late. With very bad grace he had just downed the remains of the first whiskey, and by the time I got to him—it cannot have been as long as two whole minutes—he was already showing signs of having had too much. His dark complexion had grown yet ruddier; his dark eyes had retreated even further under his beetling brow.

‘Hello, Keig,’ I greeted him loudly. ‘I’m rather pressed for time. Can you come straight away?’

But my plan to whisk him from under Willine’s nose failed utterly. Keig simply made no reply, standing there immovable as an earth-implanted rock even when Willine tried to thrust yet another drink into his great red hanging hand.

I felt an immense sense of exasperation. How the devil was I to get him out?

I doubt whether I ever would have done on my own. But without the least trace of warning he swung round and blundered into the night. I ran out in his wake. Would he try to march straight through a big green bus?

He did not. He seemed even to have a clear idea of where he was going, which was home. I tried to catch up with him but he was walking at such speed, and with so little consideration for anyone in his path, that I was reduced to trotting along always a yard or two behind.

We arrived at his rooms. He had trouble with the key to the house, which was difficult enough to fit into its hole in the paint-peeled door at the best of times since the only illumination came from the fanlight above, already partially obscured by the landlady’s obligatory doll-statue of Christ the King.

Eventually Margaret came down.

‘Margaret, good evening,’ I said. ‘Listen, I’m afraid some of the lads played a sort of trick on Keig. He’s a bit—’

‘He’s drunk,’ Margaret shot back at me. ‘I can see that.’

She put her arm through Keig’s and drew him in. It was a gesture tender as could be. Keig’s other hand swung back and sent the solid old house-door crashing to.

I stood on the steps, feeling doubly shut out.

When I called for Keig next evening to go up to the Council meeting neither he nor Margaret made any reference to the night before. Nor did I. What was there to say?

We took the bus out towards Howth where, thanks to his retirement pay from the British Navy, Donald Fayrhare lived in rather more comfort than the rest of the exiles, and as we entered his garden an odd incident occurred which I thought almost nothing of at the time, putting it down as another example of how the Dublin Oceanans from highest to lowest could do nothing without making a slight mystery, though later I was to realize that there was indeed a mystery but hardly a slight one.

Marshall Tear came out of the house before we reached the door with a girl of twenty or so who unexpectedly stopped and peered towards us.

‘But isn’t this Thomas Keig?’ she said to Tear. ‘I can still see the face on all those “Wanted” posters back on the island. You must introduce me.’

Tear did not immediately reply. But after a moment he stepped up.

‘Yes, my dear,’ he said. This is Mr Keig.’

He gestured to the girl.

‘This is Alexandra Oboy,’ he explained. ‘Sister of a former pupil of mine. She had the kindness to come to see me on her way to England.’

‘Mr Keig,’ the girl burst out, ‘you don’t know how I wished I could have made my departure from Oceana only half as much of an event as yours. But all I could do was quarrel with my brother and bring a little discredit on the Defence Force.’

Up till now Keig had been standing woodenly there. But these last words stirred him.

‘Defence Force?’ he asked sharply.

‘Miss Oboy’s brother,’ Tear said rapidly, ‘is, I am afraid, an ardent weekend officer in the Defence Force. So naturally there was some upset. But I think I hear a bus. Hurry, my dear, they’re not all that frequent.’

As the girl ran off, calling goodbyes, I wondered a little at Tear’s abruptness. But other events almost immediately drove all such thoughts from my head.

Tear led us into the Fayrhares’ drawing-room, sweetly smelling with vases of spring flowers that made our warlike enterprise seem hopelessly remote, and the rest of the Council came in almost at our heels. Soon Donald’s large-hipped, pink-and-white English wife, full of gardening talk, left us and Cormode set up a card-table underneath the hanging central light-bowl with its border of pastel-coloured flowers.

I had thought that Tear himself would preside tonight, but he sat in the furthest removed of the chintz-covered armchairs and Abraham Skillicorne opened the proceedings.

‘The main business of our meeting,’ he began, ‘is to select a leader for this proposed initial landing-force of ours.’

‘I think,’ Cormode said sharply, ‘it must be generally agreed the leader almost selects himself. Commander Fayrhare is the only one of us with actual experience in war. I feel we needn’t do more than record our agreement to his name.’

Skillicorne leant back in his chair and smiled his indeterminate watery smile.

‘Most cogent,’ he said. ‘But, do you know, I think perhaps we ought to stick to the usual forms, a proposer, a seconder ... And there may be other candidates.’ There was a short silence.

‘Well, gentlemen,’ Skillicorne said, ‘I myself would like to place before you the name of Mr Michael Quine.’

My own name was the very last I expected to hear. What on earth could the old fool—only he was in many ways no fool—be up to?

I heard a voice from behind me say in a well-drilled way: ‘I should like to second that.’

‘I think,’ Skillicorne said, ‘it might be best if I explained a little. It has occurred to me that what is essential in a leader is the possession of up-to-date information about the—um—terrain. And Commander Fayrhare, well versed though he is in naval matters, has not set foot in Oceana for a number of years. Whereas Mr Quine, a successful man of the world, recently carried out an extensive reconnaissance.’

I thought of my visit to Lesneven nine months earlier, it had been an odd reconnaissance.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘But, good though your basic reason is, Mr Skillicorne, I’m simply not up to this.’

‘Oh, my dear fellow, you probably underrate yourself. I’m sure you would prove to have the necessary simple qualities.’

‘He hasn’t.’

It was Keig.

I must admit my first reaction was a sharp stab of resentment at his flat certainly, though I knew really he was perfectly correct.

By now everybody was looking at him. Once more he had said the unsayable. But he did not seem at all aware of the general disapproval.

‘You’re right about needing to know the island,’ he said to Skillicorne. ‘It’s not like it used to be. Mylchraine’s changed

it. Those Keepers of his are not the Watch, you know. They won't play fair.'

I reflected that this was certainly true. And that Fayrhare, seen in this light, was certainly wrong as leader. Set him down in territory where you would never know whom you could trust and he would almost certainly walk straight into the first trap that offered. So who would lead the force?

Keig answered for me.

'But I do know what's been going on,' he said. 'I'm the one who ought to take charge.'

Cormode reacted quickest.

'Mr Chairman,' he began.

Then a slight buzz of whispering warned him. He took a quick glance round.

I too had been looking at the others, and I had come to the same conclusion as Cormode: in spite of everything people were rapidly coming round to Keig. Hadn't he proved himself in action? I could almost hear them saying it. Cormode, who, I suspected, had been about to try for a snap vote, wisely left things alone.

But there never was any voting. Because at that moment Marshall Tear walked forward to the middle of the room.

'My friends,' he said, 'your discussions have been most interesting. But I had long ago decided that I myself should head whatever liberating force first sets foot in Oceana, however small. Such is my duty and my privilege.'

3

The sea off the Oceana coast was flatly calm. Behind us as we sat on the oil-stained bottom boards of an old box-like landing-craft a round goldeny summer moon, slipping inch by inch under the horizon, sent towards us an ever-narrowing path of light splintered into jiggling diamonds by the tiny wavelets. Our engine had been switched off half an hour before, and we waited in silence.

In the strong pinkish moonlight I looked across the huddled ranks of the hundred-odd men in our craft at the easily identified, broad-shouldered, bullet-headed form of Keig. He was about as far from me as it was possible to be in the small area of the ship.

We had not exactly quarrelled. But I had found myself unable to take too much of him. Because straight after the meeting at Fayrhare's house he had expressed himself to me about Tear in such stubbornly self-confident terms that I had felt he was quite beyond the reach of argument.

'He's not the man for it,' he had said. 'None of them would be much good. But he'll be the worst of the lot.'

'You're so certain it's you who ought to be in charge?'

'Yes,' he had replied.

Just that.

And as we were embarking at a lonely spot in Bantry Bay, in answer to something I incautiously said, he had returned to the subject.

‘You’d think he’s set on making a mess of it,’ he had growled. ‘He couldn’t have hit on a more unmistakable day, and he’s already chosen to land at the place anyone with a grain of sense would expect.’

That was a little unfair on Tear: it had all along been the opinion of all those with any specialized knowledge that there was not really any choice about a landing place. Oceana scarcely presents a shore favourable to any landfall: the whole of its far, western seaboard faces the Atlantic in one long jagged mass of broken cliffs and high tumbling rocks with hardly so much as a single tiny beach along all its hundred-miles length, and the eastern coast is little better. There the hills are lower but they still present grey granite faces directly to the sea with only the deep inlet at Portharnel providing any decent harbourage and one other small port used by fishing boats near the southern tip of the island, a hopelessly remote place called Caloestown. The sole beaches that are anything more than strips of sand at the foot of cliffs lie some twelve or fifteen miles north of Lesneven at a point where the hills make their only considerable break on the whole coast. Here for a stretch of not much more than ten miles there are sands and the approach is easy, and here, all expert opinion was agreed, was the sole place where a landing in any strength was practicable.

We knew of course that Mr Mylchraine must be aware of this. The fact had been the subject of countless protracted Oceanan conversations during the Second World War when there had been talk of both sides wanting to occupy us. And in those turbulent days—by Oceana standards—a coastal battery and powerful searchlight had been installed on the north tip of the Kernel, giving protection to the whole vulnerable area.

From the crew of the weekly steamer we had learnt that the big searchlight was once again in nightly operation. But

a landing-party was to go ahead of us in a dinghy, with Keig leading it, to try to put the light out of action before we made our final approach. Their little low-silhouette craft had already been inflated and it was now bobbing gently in the calm water at the end of a rope beside the place where Keig was sitting, waiting to start its journey into the dangerous swathe of diffused white light that we could see ahead. Keig intended, if at all possible, to deal with the searchlight crew in silence. And for this purpose he had brought with him his old axe. It rested now up against his shoulder, its clean head glinting in the dying rays of the sinking moon.

I sat looking at it. Was its butt-end really going to come hard down on the nape of someone's neck before another hour had passed? The idea seemed quite unreal. And the rest of us? Were we really going to go running down the slatted ramp of our craft on to those sandy beaches? The beaches where I had once spent whole long days swimming and sunbathing? There was nothing to convince me that any of it at all would happen.

I turned to look at Marshall Tear in the hope that the sight of him would dispel these curious feelings. He was standing, as he had stood for several hours now, on the tiny aft bridge of our motionless craft. But the moonlight that had perhaps been responsible for casting such a web of unreality over everything else seemed to be affecting him too. While I watched it ceased to strike on his mane of grey hair as the upper rim of the moon at last sank beneath the far horizon. But its effect was not dispelled. Tall and upright on the little platform of the bridge, with hands thrust into the pockets of the long flapping riding mackintosh he wore, Tear had about him an invincibly buccaneering air. And I felt that the business that would begin at any moment now, with the sinking of the moon, should be quieter, better conducted and more grim than that.

A few seconds later Fayrhare appeared beside Tear, coming up from the tiny engine-room below the bridge. Here, I thought, is the sort of simply efficient figure that ought to be setting the keynote of what is to come. And with a sudden inner tenseness I realized that most probably Donald had in fact come back up on to the bridge to confirm with Tear that the moment had arrived for Keig and the three others in the dinghy party to set out.

But before the necessary short consultation could take place something else happened. Something altogether unexpected.

Clear and definite as a black penstroke on white paper, there came across the silence of the calm sea a noise none of us had at all counted on hearing—the powerful drone of a marine engine.

I felt the slumped figures all round me stiffen.

Marshall Tear asked in a low voice: ‘What is it?’

Donald answered him with a crisply reassuring calmness that warmed me to him again.

‘I dare say it’s just an old lobster-potter slipping off for some fishing.’

In the quiet his reply was clearly audible to everybody.

‘It’s no lobster boat,’ I heard Keig growl. There aren’t any lobsters this end of the island. The boats all run south for the fishing.’

That was more than I knew. But I had no doubt he was right.

‘No need to panic,’ Donald said.

Everyone sat listening.

Then a new explanation occurred to Tear.

'I should say it's some passing ship,' he announced. 'A small cargo vessel of some sort.'

'Could be,' Donald answered. 'Though we're off any shipping lanes here, except for the steamer and she's in Cobh tonight.'

We waited in silence after that. The distant engine-noise did not seem to be receding. Ahead the great diffused beam of the big searchlight on the Kernel was unmoving.

And then our unspoken questions were abruptly answered. A sudden hard narrow ray of sharp light cut out across the glistening surface of the sea from the direction of the mysterious vessel.

Someone down near the raised ramp jumped to his feet.

'Get down,' Donald shouted in a voice which had cowed tougher men than our amateur soldiers.

The figure sprawled quickly forward. But the tugging flutterings of dismay that were running through all the rest of the men crouched on the grease-stained bottom boards of our craft could not be as easily dealt with. A vessel equipped with a searchlight of this sort could be only one thing in these waters: an addition to the island's defences of which we had had absolutely no knowledge. It looked as if our heavy lumbering ship was going to be carved up like a moribund whale at the mercy of a barracuda.

Kneeling on one knee so that my head just cleared the side, I watched the hard pencil of white light flicking swiftly to and fro across the surface of the sea. It could not be many minutes before it hit on us.

On the little bridge Donald was consulting with Tear in a voice so low I could hear nothing of what was said. After a little he called quietly forward.

'Mr Keig.'

‘Yes?’

‘Haul that dinghy aboard, will you? We want to be all clear.’

‘Right.’

Keig stood up cautiously. But before he had even had time to lean over the metal side and catch hold of the dinghy rope the searchlight beam found us.

I felt its bright whiteness dazzle me and momentarily closed my eyes. A second later the first shot came.

There was a sudden splash some fifteen yards ahead of us, sounding incredibly noisy in the quietness of the still summer night. And then almost immediately a sharp barking crack came from the direction of the distant hostile vessel.

Donald shouted something and someone in the little engine-house at his feet brought our big engine smartly to life. It roared out deafeningly and the air all round was at once thick with the smell of fumes. Our heavy craft began, terribly slowly, to push through the water.

Above the din I did not hear the second warning shot. But I saw the white water-spout from it startlingly close to our side, and I was aware too that the beam of the searchlight was now narrowing rapidly as our attacker came forward into a killing position.

I heard Donald shout again. Our engine died as abruptly as it had sprung into life. Our attempt at escape had been every bit as short and futile as might have been expected.

In the comparative silence that settled on the indifferently calm sea I could hear the engine of the attacking vessel again. She was nosing quietly towards us, and peering over the side I was soon able to make out that she was some sort of launch, not very large but armed with that swivelling searchlight on her cabin roof and a curious four-barrelled

gun on her fore-deck. She was not much of a warship really, but she was more than enough to deal with us.

From behind her blinding white light a voice called across the water through a loud-hailer. 'Stay just where you are.'

A flood of grey despair overwhelmed me. So this was to be the end of it all: a picnic party cruise across the calm sea, a couple of gun-shots and then confinement in one of Mr Mylchraine's gaols for years to come.

Donald Fayrhare must have been experiencing an almost identical reaction. Life as a convict under Mr Mylchraine's Keepers as he had heard Keig describe it would be very different from days spent working in his garden overlooking the sea near Howth.

'Well,' I heard him say quite loudly to Marshall Tear, 'it looks as if we haven't been too bright. We ought to have got to know about this chappie.'

And Tear's answer was equally audible in the quietness as the launch crept steadily nearer.

'Cleverness is not always the needed quality. Sometimes courage is altogether more important. I knew about this launch. She carries an Oerlikon gun.'

It was then that I remembered the girl in the Fayrhares' garden and how keen Tear had been to get rid of her.

Keig stood up. Ignoring the sharply revealing glare of the launch's searchlight he turned and faced Tear.

That's wicked,' he announced. 'You knew the strength of the enemy and you still let us go.'

'My dear man,' Tear said coldly, 'if you had known the facts you wouldn't have set out, would you?'

'I certainly wouldn't have set out in this tomfool way.'

'And there are times when the heart of a great cause needs to be warmed with the red wine of blood,' Tear

answered.

He spoke loudly. The words rang out in the still night—a declaration of faith.

And then, clearly outlined up on the bridge in the cruel light beaming at us from the approaching launch, he stooped for an instant and stood up again holding cradled in his arms the heaviest of our weapons, a Thompson sub-machinegun. With legs braced he pointed it in the direction of the oncoming white searchlight and fired.

It was a roaring shattering burst of sound. The light in front of him disappeared with cataclysmic suddenness.

Now I understood everything. No wonder the whole expedition had had an air of unreality. As an invasion of hostile territory it had been a complete fake. Tear had tricked us all into accompanying him on what he had planned in its place, self-immolation. Keig's prophecy had come too true: that voice of Tear's had hypnotized us and him into trouble indeed.

All around me there was nothing short of panic. People stood up and yelled wildly at Tear to stop shooting. Others flung themselves down full length and hugged the oily bottom boards. I saw one or two vague shapes, as the darkness grew less thick, slipping over the sides into the sea. It would be a long, long swim to land. And what would await them if they got there? The launch, I had seen, had a tall wireless aerial and no doubt even at this moment Mr Mylchraine's Keepers were being roused from sleep and sent down to the beaches in their dozens.

Above the clamour on our craft—with a small determined group now forcing its way aft towards Tear and his still intermittently yammering machinegun—I could hear the angry roar of the launch's engine. She seemed to be swinging round away from us in a wide circle. Already she must be well out of range of Tear's fire. At any moment she

might find us again and open up with that four-barrel Oerlikon of hers. Even in the darkness we could hardly hope to escape. Our engine had throbbed as noisily as a thick old car's, and whenever we moved we churned out behind us a broad white wake that must show up for miles.

But our respite was even shorter than I had counted on. At this moment there swept palely towards us the wide diffused beam of the giant searchlight on the Kernel. The launch's wireless had been used to even better effect than I had foretold.

And the instant we showed up in that broad-spread beam the shooting began again. It was at once plain that the earlier rounds had indeed been fired as warnings: behind that four-barrelled gun was a grimly efficient marksman. The very first shell hit us down by the waterline somewhere near the prow. I heard screams and almost at once our floating box began to cant over towards the place where the sea was coming in.

The shouting and the yells increased sharply in intensity. Above them all there came once more the sound of Tear's machinegun, like the passionate tantrum drumming of a child's heels on a floor.

In the pale white beam of the distant searchlight I could see his tall figure clearly, standing up there on the bridge. I think Donald Fayrhare was trying to get him down, but he had his back to everybody and with his legs firmly astride he continued, lost in a dream, to fire blind bursts into the night.

And then the next shot came.

It blew Tear to pieces. One moment he was there, grey mane of hair dishevelled, long mackintosh flapping round his splayed-out legs. And the next moment he seemed to be flying in all directions.

But I had no time to contemplate his end. The launch was now firing rapidly and every shot was telling. Water came pouring in from every side. The wounded and the frightened were screaming hard. Most of the others were scrambling overboard and swimming out of harm's way as fast as they could. I thought it was high time I joined them. I gave a quick glance round to see if Keig was anywhere about, but he seemed to have disappeared in the confusion. I bundled myself over the metal side and dropped into the warm night sea.

I swam hard for a little, as much to get out of the confusion as to avoid the Oerlikon shells. But when I no longer biffed a wildly swimming fellow-rebel with every stroke I turned on my back and surveyed the scene behind me. I had a notion I was going to need to conserve as much energy as I could if I was in any way to extricate myself from the disaster.

I was just in time to see our craft, purchased with a large part of the gold I had helped Keig seize on the island a little less than a year before, disappear from sight. Her long upright exhaust-pipe pointed skywards, thin and black, for one instant like a line put on a smudgy photograph to indicate the exact scene of a crime and then it plunged into the churned-up sea in its turn and only a score or two of bobbing heads and two or three just perceptible black sodden floating bodies remained in the diffused light still cast on the spot from the direction of the Kernel.

The launch however was plain to see, a clear silhouette in that same light. She had ceased firing now, and I thought her engine had begun to throb a little more loudly as for the second time she nosed forward to inspect us.

I wondered what to do. Should I struggle out of my coat, abandon the pistol hanging leadenly in one of my pockets and attempt to swim for the shore and risk being picked up

by patrolling Keepers? Or should I do what I saw several people nearer the launch already doing: wave like mad and shout to be taken on board? So far the launch was making no move to help anybody, but no doubt her crew would come to the rescue before long. Only that meant one of Mr Mylchraine's goals for certain.

Still the launch made no move. I saw one dark head striking out firmly towards her. Presumably they were busy on board telling the shore by radio what the outcome of the engagement had been.

And then, quite without warning, the shelling began again. A first shot blasted up in a white spume of foam where the head of the foremost swimmer had been. And, next, shot after shot went hurtling into the main mass of bodies in the water.

For two seconds I experienced a feeling of cold outrage, and then fear took over. I no longer debated what I should do: I swam just as hard as I could go away from that massacre, salt water slapping into my half-open mouth and an acute feeling of sickness infecting the whole centre of my body.

I did not look back. I dared not. I concentrated for all I was worth on forcing my legs to work harder, on cleaving with my arms at the water in front of me to get through it as quickly as possible.

But soon it was borne in on me that the water-plumes of the shells were getting nearer and nearer. The thought entered my head that the gunner on the launch must have dealt with the main mass of survivors and that he was now amusing himself by chasing individuals as they swam frantically away.

But there was nothing else I could do but swim. Nothing but swim and swim and hope that by sheer chance they would miss me until I had got far enough away. I swam on,

gulping, panicked and wretched. And then I realized that the shooting had stopped.

At first I would not let myself believe it, but went on splashing away at the water before me. But my exhausted body was more of a realist than my frightened mind. I found I was swimming more and more slowly, and at last I decided I might as well roll over and see what was happening.

A totally unexpected sight met my eyes. There was the familiar silhouette of the launch, spindly radio aerial, awkward-shaped four-barrel gun and all, stationary at what must have been almost the spot we had sunk. And standing on the roof of her cabin, plain to see in the distant searchlight beam, waving his arms and, I think, hallooing, was Keig.

He was unmistakable. I would have known the outline of those bull shoulders anywhere. A flood of energy surged back into me. I struck out towards him.

It took me long enough to reach him though. My new energy was short-lived and soon the effect of all that had happened in the preceding twenty minutes began dragging heavily down on me. But in the end I made it and Keig hauled me on board, too spent to do anything more than lie on the narrow strip of deck beside the cabin and acknowledge the nightmare had somehow ended.

But eventually my sense of curiosity flickered to life again. I heaved myself up a little and looked about. Keig was back on the cabin roof, steadily surveying the water all round. The utmost quiet prevailed. The launch's engine was not running; there were no shouts from the sea; no sounds from below; only the plip-plop of the wavelets slapping against our sides.

‘What happened?’

Keig looked down at me.

‘When that madman started using the machinegun,’ he said, ‘I reckoned the only way to stop them blowing us to bits was to get on to their boat. So I slipped down into the dinghy and paddled round and took ‘em by surprise.’

‘All by yourself?’

‘They were middling occupied shooting poor fellas swimming in the water,’ Keig replied. ‘I had my axe and I’d done for the gunner before they even knew I was there. A couple of ‘em came at me, but my blood was up by then.’

‘But how many were there altogether?’

‘Six, if you count one that was wounded already. The last two jumped in and swam for it.’

Keig turned away and looked round the quiet sea again. The beam of the distant searchlight was still playing on us. I suppose back there on the Kernel they thought the craft’s outrageous task had been completed. I saw suddenly that Mr Mylchraine himself must have given the order to kill us all; he would have been woken in that big house of his not many miles away from the searchlight post and told what had happened; and then he had ordered us all to be finished off. It seemed revealed to me like a truth.

‘Reckon there’s no one else alive in the water now,’ Keig said sombrely.

He jumped down beside me.

‘You weren’t hit as far as I could see,’ he went on. ‘You about ready to give me a hand? We’re going to need all the help we can get if we’re going to get back to Ireland. I pulled Fayrhare out but he’s hurt bad, and he’s the only one who knows anything much about boats.’

I made an attempt to stand and, by holding hard on to the cabin roof, succeeded.

‘Are there many dead in all?’ I asked.

There are eighteen of us here, not counting Mylchraine's man,' Keig answered. 'And you and I and one other are the only ones not wounded.'

He stumped off down below and a few seconds later I heard him talking about re-starting the engine to someone I recognized as a man called Fred Quiddie, a motor mechanic by trade. Before long they had managed it and Keig came up and took the wheel. After a few experimental swaying turns he succeeded in getting us heading steadily away from Oceana in the direction of Ireland—if the amateur reading of the compass that I had done for him was in any way right.

When we seemed well set I went below to get rid of some of my wet clothes and see if there was anything I could do. There turned out to be quite enough in the way of finding first-aid supplies and generally looking after the wounded to keep me busy right until I noticed through the narrow cabin windows the whiteness of dawn.

I made my way up on deck again and Keig at once asked me to take the wheel for a bit. I thought he sounded a little strained, though in the light of his customary severe rationing of his words it was difficult to be sure.

I held the spokes of the wheel and watched him as he made his way stiffly forward.

Perhaps it's only that he's tired, I thought. He's every right to be.

But that was not what the matter was.

He went up as far as the curiously-shaped Oerlikon gun and there I saw him stoop. Then I realized what it was he had wanted. His axe was there. He must have propped it up against the barrels of the gun when the last of Mr Mylchraine's men had jumped overboard, and only with the coming of the light had he seen it again.

I smiled to myself. Had even that tough soul felt the childish need to touch a familiar object?

And then I saw that he was holding the broad blade of the axe close up to his face and looking at it intently. I leant forward and peered in my turn. The light was strong now—there was not a cloud in the sky—and the launch was not after all more than a few yards long. I was able to see quite easily that the once shining axe-head was plainly and darkly stained.

Blood, I thought with a sudden heave of queasiness.

On that steel head, which I had seen used to fell saplings for our escape raft on the Kernel and more prosaically chopping wood for our cautious fires when we hid in the fir woods waiting to ambush the gold train, there was human blood. The blood of the men Keig had killed the night before.

And from the way he still held the axe up to his face and looked at it so unblinkingly I guessed that thoughts much like my own must be passing through his head. He had told us all in the Swedenborgians' hall that getting rid of Mylchraine was going to mean being as ruthless as Mylchraine was prepared to be himself. Now he had witnessed that ruthlessness and in one short cosmos-altering hour had had to match it with a ruthlessness of his own.

Was the lesson bitterer than he had expected?

Suddenly he tipped forward on to one knee, swung the long-handled axe round and plunged it into the boiling sea by our bow. For a long minute he held it there, peering passionately downwards. Then he straightened himself up and took a quick confirmatory glance at the blade. It shone and glittered in the new day's light.

I think that at that moment he saw me watching him. Anyhow he turned his head and gave me a steady look.

‘When we get back and can talk with no one to hear us,’ he said, ‘I’ve got something I want to tell you.’

He swung round to face ahead again.

I wondered what he was going to do.

Then, just before he began, I knew. He placed his two feet firmly on the planking of the deck. He flexed the muscles of his shoulders and he sent that long axe twirling up into the morning air.

4

We reached Ireland, at a lonely spot in Courtmacsherry Bay about twenty miles from Cork, towards evening that day and succeeded eventually in getting all our wounded ashore. And it was while we were waiting for Cormode and the rest of the Revolutionary Council to come in some hastily hired cars from Cork with a sympathizing doctor that Keig had the private talk with me he had spoken about.

We walked off along the bright green seaweed-strewn rocks of the shore until we were well out of earshot of the others. Then Keig halted.

‘I’m going back there,’ he said.

To Oceana?’

‘Where else?’

‘But on your own?’

‘Not at all. With enough men to guard a good load of guns till they can be handed on to lads there who’ll use them for what they were made for.’

‘You’ve got gold left to buy them then?’ I asked, having long before lost track of the figures.

‘There’s some. Not as much as there should be, but maybe enough.’

I thought for a little, flapping my arms to keep warm in my still damp and salt-heavy clothes.

‘Do I take it,’ I asked, ‘that you don’t intend to consult the other Council members?’

‘I don’t intend to tell anyone at all a mortal thing,’ Keig answered. ‘There’ll be you and whichever others I pick on later. And not a soul else.’

He swung up his axe, which had never been long out of his grasp since he had washed the blood off it that morning, and gently tossed it once or twice in the palms of his stubby-fingered hands.

‘There’ll be no more blabbing in front of that flap-eared barman at Caveen’s,’ he said.

‘No,’ I replied, ‘I reckon that chap made a tidy sum passing things on. If you can stop that, you’re half way home.’

‘Then that’s all,’ Keig said.

And he turned and tramped back to our waiting wounded. I followed more slowly.

What was I to make of this? Bringing down the government of a country, even of such a small country as Oceana, was an undertaking of magnitude. Had Keig anything like enough weight for it? Or was this simply a rush of over-confidence to the head born of his success in pulling a few chestnuts from Marshall Tear’s fire?

I could not make up my mind. And, in any case, Tear’s name set up a new train of thought. The man had after all died what they call a hero’s death and this was a quiet time in the world, unless something altogether unexpected had broken in our absence. I rang Fleet Street as soon as we had got back to the telephone we had used to fetch Cormode.

With our return to Dublin, limping though it was, my vague imaginings on that deserted shore came true with a rapidity that took even me by surprise. Every one of the survivors fit enough to travel was at once buttonholed at Heuston Station by a pack of reporters flown in from England, and even from further afield. Only Keig succeeded

in shaking them off. Margaret was there to meet him looking, I noticed with an abrupt foreboding, not at all well. The anxiety while Keig had been away seemed to have made her more ill in a few days than in all the time we had been in Ireland. Keig hurried over to her and pushed a way clear.

But the others were only too happy to talk, and Marshall Tear, from having been a name sub-editors would have to look up in the cuttings if ever he was mentioned, became within days one of those people everybody has heard of.

And in consequence the Revolutionary Council now became a hive of activity and in a field quite new to it, the receiving of donations. Even the placid exiles who had preferred jobs in London or Manchester to plotting in Dublin when they heard—as I saw that they did—of the huge sums being sent from America, where the Tear cult caught on by proxy with the Irish, began to send the money that had been so noticeably absent during Tear's lifetime. So soon I worked full time for the cause and was paid for doing so. My only regret was that Keig had quarrelled with me.

It happened about a month after our return. I had actually seen him only once since the big scrimmage at Heuston Station and, feeling I owed him a visit, I dropped round to his rooms at about six one evening, when I calculated that he would have been back from his nawying job long enough for Margaret to have given him his evening meal, if she was able to.

It seemed I had judged the time to a nicety. The oilcloth-covered table in the small sitting-room had been mostly cleared and Keig was sitting at it with a book spread squarely open in front of him and a cup of tea by his side. Margaret was up, sitting in a battered armchair by the window with some sewing.

‘Sorry I haven’t managed to look in as often as I used to,’ I said. ‘But I’ve been fantastically busy.’

‘I know that,’ Keig said, hardly looking up from the book.

After a moment I pulled out the chair opposite him and sat down.

‘Well,’ Margaret said, ‘since it looks as though you’re here to stay, would you like a cup of tea?’

She got up, worryingly listlessly, and fetched a cup and saucer.

‘What’s that you’re reading then?’ I asked Keig.

‘It’s what they call memoirs.’

‘Oh? Whose?’

Memoir-reading was a new side to Keig.

He let his quick dismissive frown flicker on his broad forehead and named a well-known British general of the 1939-45 War.

‘But it’s nothing more than bickering all the way,’ he added.

‘That’s pretty well standard form for memoirs. But why are you reading these?’

He glowered across at me.

‘Why do you think? Because I want to find out how to fight a war. I suppose you can’t tell me what else to read?’

‘Well,’ I said disconcertedly, ‘there’s a chap called Clausewitz. He’s supposed to have written the great treatise on war. But the subject’s hardly my field.’

‘I thought you knew about books,’ Keig growled.

There are books and books. You can’t expect me to be able to rap out an answer on absolutely everything between covers.’

‘Hm.’

And he simply plunged his head between his hands and began reading away again in the slow way I had observed of him before, as if he could not believe that anything printed deserved of less than the fullest attention.

‘No, look,’ I said, ‘what have I done?’

He did at least take his eyes off the print.

‘What have you done? What haven’t you done, with your Marshall Tear this and your Marshall Tear that? Does it bring you in plenty? Well set up again, are you, in spite of having let yourself get caught up with fighting Mylchraine?’

‘But listen . . .’

I was taken by surprise. I had seen my promotion of Tear as wholly for the good of the cause and here was Keig disapproving root and branch. I tried to explain.

‘All my Marshall Tear this and Marshall Tear that is bringing us a good deal of support. Three months ago hardly anyone anywhere knew there was any opposition to Mr Mylchraine. Now he’s probably one of the top ten detested men in the world.’

‘And you think he cares?’ Keig said.

I blinked.

‘Well, perhaps not. But all the same it helps a hell of a lot to have world public opinion on your side.’

‘How?’

There is, of course, a good case to be made out for the effectiveness of public backing for any cause, but faced with Keig’s blunt demand for chapter and verse I was momentarily at a loss.

‘It’s bringing in a good deal of cash anyhow,’ I filled in.

‘And what are they doing with the cash they get?’

‘Listen,’ I said, more aggressively than I had meant to, ‘they may not be buying arms, but you seem to forget people like Cormode and Skillicorne are pretty intelligent. And if they think there’s a reasonable chance of getting Mr Mylchraine to change his ways by mobilizing world opinion, who the hell are you to tell them they’re so wrong?’

‘They are wrong,’ Keig said, as you might tell a Martian he was in error when he claimed two and two did not make four.

‘Well, I’m pretty much inclined to back their judgment all the same,’ I retorted. ‘Dammit, they study world affairs, history. They’re able to make comparisons. They bring some breadth of outlook to all this.’

‘I suppose Tear was like that too?’ Keig asked.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I think he was. I’m not cooking up all the stuff I write on him, you know. Marshall Tear was by no means a fool.’

Keig stared me straight in the face across the pages of the general’s bickering memoirs.

‘Tear was no more than a sulky brat,’ he said. ‘Kicking down his little mud-pie because no one would look at it when he wanted.’

‘No,’ I almost shouted with exasperation. ‘Tear may have damn nearly got us all killed, but nevertheless his way of fighting was pretty tough, as tough as yours every bit.’

‘It wasn’t as tough as Mylchraine’s,’ Keig said without heat.

‘How can you say that? I tell you Marshall Tear has already done far more by dying the way he did than anyone who’s stayed alive. Look at what men like Patrick Pearse did for Ireland by their deaths. Tear’s done just the same for Oceana.’

Keig simply stood up, pushing his chair back from the oilcloth-covered table, and looked at me.

‘Aren’t you going to come to Oceana?’ he asked.

It was a choice. I saw that at once. And the decision I eventually took was a bitter one.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘but I’m going on with the campaign on Tear.’

‘Goodbye then.’

Keig stood facing me. I got up.

‘Goodbye,’ I said. ‘Goodbye, Margaret.’

I half-saw her white pallidly shining face give me a sharp dismissing nod. I turned and went out.

Months passed before I saw him again. I was, as I had said, wonderfully busy and I knew too there would be no point in going to him and suggesting we could ‘be friends’ if I was not prepared to say I now agreed with him. And I was not. You just can not, I said to myself every time I thought of him, fly in the face of all other opinion the way he did.

One glimpse of him I did catch. It was in the dull and dreary public library in Pearse Street where early one evening I was chasing some newspaper reference, and as I padded past the reading desks through long mote-thick beams of late summer sunlight I suddenly spotted those unforgettable shoulders squarely addressed to a large book.

I went round behind and peered over. The book was Clausewitz ‘On War’. I felt in the circumstances I had better not interrupt.

The date when we did meet again I can pinpoint exactly because it was the day of the first Marshall Tear Anniversary Meeting. The Tear industry had begun to die down, and we had hit on the notion of a big public meeting to revive

interest. The preparations went auspiciously and before long we found we had contracted for a full-scale gathering at that traditional Dublin meeting-place, Nelson's Pillar—still in those days presiding rather heavily over O'Connell Street.

It had been agreed as well that the day before the big event the Revolutionary Council should choose a full successor to the lost leader so that he could then be presented to the faithful in the right atmosphere. Old Abraham Skillicorne was the most popular choice, but Peter Cormode was also seeking the vacant throne and there was some backing for Donald Fayrhare, Partly because he was the most likeable of men and Partly because he had been wounded when Tear had died. In the earliest stages of the contest—which with a Council seat myself now I was in a good position to appraise—I viewed the whole business with some amusement, but before long no one could think of anything else and I was fuming night and day with exasperation.

I even complained to Cormode.

'It's perfectly simple,' he replied, 'the movement needs leadership. Clifford Willine tells me you're refusing to make up your mind over your vote. Do you think that's altogether responsible?'

I smiled, in spite of my exasperation.

'What if I plump for Donald?' I said.

Cormode's big pointed nose twitched.

'I suppose what you'd really like,' he said, 'is to see your friend Keig heading the movement.'

And I realized suddenly that this was indeed what I would have liked. Cormode must have spotted the reaction.

'Look,' he said, 'personally I feel Keig somehow had a raw deal. If things go right, I have a feeling I could bring him in again.'

Or, how about voting for Cormode?

'I doubt if even you could pull that off,' I said.

And when it came to it I left my voting slip blank.

It would have made no difference. Cormode had engineered himself, it turned out, a two-vote victory.

However, despite the little help I got, the Anniversary Meeting was an enormous success, even to the point of the crowds' enthusiasm causing the local citizenry spontaneously to collect huge amounts of loose change. And it was while I was busy stowing this away in a variety of too thin paper bags and sagging cardboard boxes at the back of a van I had borrowed that a quiet voice came from behind me.

'Can you spare a minute?'

The note of request was unfamiliar, but the burr was instantly recognizable.

I lurched round in my crouching position in the low-roofed van.

'Keig,' I said. 'Come and have a drink, or a cup of tea.'

'No. This'll do. No one's about. I've been watching my chance.'

'Well, all right, if you're so keen to keep out of the way. Come in and sit beside me.'

I humped myself down and Keig hoisted himself into the van and, in spite of his girth, settled neatly down among the bags and boxes.

'What I wanted to say was this,' he began in a low voice. 'I'm not far off starting preparations now. Will you join in with me after all?'

I did not hesitate a second.

'Of course.'

5

So I threw in my lot with Keig again. The pull had been there all along, however much it had got buried by my doubts—or fears—about the way he had dismissed all the weight of opinion contrary to him over how to fight Mr Mylchraine. The mere fact that he had climbed down was all that was needed to send scattering aside the debris of respect for conventional wisdom that had temporarily hidden the invisible bond tying me to him.

It turned out too that I was not to become involved in any dilemma of loyalty. Cormode was master of the exile movement now and liked to show it. So it was easy for me to relinquish my various responsibilities. Soon I even took pleasure in passing on to Clifford Willine the odd occasional commission to write something about Tear—a pretty feeble job he made of that too.

So in place of sitting battering at my typewriter, making telephone calls and shuffling about bits of paper I went marching.

This was Keig's idea. He told me bluntly that anyone going into Oceana with him would need to be in really good fettle and that I was not. So we marched. In the evenings, while the nights slowly drew in, out in the Dublin Mountains, mile upon mile. At first it was just the two of us, but before long there were others busy also in the 'military drill' that Keig had advocated, and been mocked over, in the Swedenborgians' hall nearly two years before.

One of the first to come was Donald Fayrhare. I was a good deal surprised to see him. I would have thought the ex-lieutenant-commander in him might have jibbed. But we were going to need someone to handle a vessel at sea, and Donald had certainly shown up well in the attack on the landing-craft, so I imagine Keig must have gone out of his way to persuade him. However, during the whole of that evening, and afterwards, I never once detected Donald trying even so much as to assume an air of equality. He simply waited for orders and then obeyed. And Keig, as simply, gave the orders. I handed it to both of them.

Bit by bit our small band grew until fifteen of us were under training. We were an odd lot, but Keig was determined that nothing should get to the ears of the talkative crew in Caveen's Bar. So he recruited only those he satisfied himself he could trust. We even included a barber, a tubby middle-aged chap called Francis Crowe who worked at one of the big Dublin hotels. He was the last man you would have thought of as a freedom fighter, inexorably pompous of manner, always well-manicured and neat-haired, and noticeably plump in the hips.

I questioned him one Sunday morning after we had been doing a spell of rifle drill about how Keig had picked on him.

'You were never one of the crowd at Caveen's, were you?' I asked.

'Well, no,' he answered. 'Rather inclined to the noisy, some of those people, if you get my meaning.'

'Then where did you meet Keig.'

He smirked a little.

'It was a funny thing, really. He came into my salon, you know. Of course, he wasn't wanting a haircut. I believe his wife does that for him. But he was with a foreign sort of

gentleman in a great hurry who intimated he needed a quick trim between planes.'

I suspected this must have been a 'merchant-of-death' arms salesman, no less.

'And Keig?' I asked.

'Ah, now that was peculiar if you like. I had just finished my gentleman and he had hurried off. Very generous tipper, if I may say so. And then Mr Keig came up. "You're from Oceana, aren't you?" he said. Just like that. No what you might call preliminaries. Well, you know Mr Keig.'

He looked over to where Keig was carefully replacing our rifles in their long wooden crates.

'Yes,' he said, 'he must have seen the copy of the old *Messenger* I had in my pigeonhole. I still get it every week. Keeps one in touch, if you know what I mean.'

'And on the strength of you being Oceanan he recruited you?'

'Oh, dear me, no. Mr Keig is a great deal more careful than that. I mean, he asked me first of all why I didn't mingle with the others. I told him I didn't think they were all of them a nice class of person. Somewhat irresponsible, I said. And then he asked me what I meant by that, and I told him "Too much talk and not enough do." Those were my very words.'

'And then did he recruit you?'

'Well, yes. In a manner of speaking you might say, yes.'

He sprang suddenly into a fighting stance and went through the motions of loading a rifle. Oddly enough, he adored drill—though I sometimes wondered if he would not have preferred the orthodox sort to Keig's very practical kind.

But all Keig's training methods were relentlessly practical, only making me wonder when it would be that we would put them to use. Of that, Keig told me nothing.

'When only one fellow needs to know a thing,' he said to me once, 'then if no one but him is told it won't get out.'

Yet it was clear that progress was being made. There were occasions when I expected to be made to run up those hills and was not called out. I imagined then that Keig was away making arrangements.

In point of fact, when the time came I did get a little advance warning, thanks to my acquaintance with Keig's peculiarities. By the middle of February our training was taking the form of exercises combining marching for miles along the deserted stony mountain roads, going up the side of a hill at a run till its slate-blue summit became so much scrawny heather under our noses, perhaps crossing the little River Dodder once or twice and ending with a bout of airgun shooting, popping away at a peeled white stick set against a dark clump of gorse, surrounded as often as not by a ring of curious black-faced sheep. It was at the finish of one of these trials that I got my privileged glimpse ahead.

About half an hour before sunset we had halted by a mound of stacked turf from a peat-bog seeking some shelter from the piercing wind. Keig was the last to arrive, having shepherded us from behind during the final stages. He came at a steady jog-trot swinging his old long-handled axe. Then about fifteen yards away he stopped and I saw him consult the impressive wristwatch he had appeared with one day shortly after our training had begun. I suppose he had set us, and himself, some secret target time. And apparently we had achieved it. Because suddenly that axe went twirling high up against the faded yellow of the winter sunset sky. At the top of its trajectory it hung for a moment like a thin Indian-ink stroke and then it fell back into Keig's waiting

hands. He threw it only once, but I knew then our moment had come.

The others had to wait a little longer to learn the news, and they heard it in a characteristically terse fashion.

‘See you don’t have anything to do after March the fifth,’ Keig said as we prepared to leave. ‘We’ll be off soon after.’

I sensed the others were abruptly experiencing the same dry-mouthed hollow-stomached exhilaration as I had. They hardly exchanged a look, but I could see they were all suddenly aware of each other and of every detail of our surroundings—the sodden piled billets of chocolate turf, the low pit of the bog darkly gleaming with collected rainwater, the dull stretches of winter heather and distant Kippure almost black at the summit against the now metallic yellow of the sky.

Only Fred Quiddie, the cock-sparrow motor mechanic who had helped bring the launch back from Oceana, was unable to resist saying something.

‘Blast that, the fifth of March,’ he quipped. ‘And me with such a dolly lined up you never saw.’

‘You and your dollies, Fred,’ said one of the others. ‘I’m surprised you haven’t another couple at least ready and waiting before then.’

Fred’s cheeky chubby face split in a grin.

‘And who said I haven’t?’ he replied. ‘Or one anyhow. But she’s no picture, just one of my regulars.’

I was a little surprised at this revelation of the tubby Fred as an active Don Juan. But you never can tell.

Keig was apparently more than surprised. I had thought he had been paying no attention, but he swung round sharply.

‘Dollies?’ he said. ‘You mean women? You mean he goes with women?’

Fred, in face of his friend’s obvious embarrassment, came forward to his own defence.

‘Well, what if I do like a girl when she’s willing?’ he said. ‘You don’t have to be a monk to go and fight Mylchraine, do you?’

‘You don’t have to go blabbing to a lot of women about just what you’re doing,’ Keig answered. ‘Do you want the same welcome from Mylchraine we got last time?’

Fred’s cheerful face looked almost comically upset.

‘Look,’ he said, ‘I didn’t know you had objections.’

‘I have,’ Keig shot back.

He turned to the rest of us.

‘I want none of it when we’re on the island. Do you hear that?’

‘All right,’ Fred answered for us, standing glowering down at his mud-caked boots.

But, unusually for Keig, that was not the end of it. Donald Fayrhare took us both back to Dublin in his small sports car, and after sitting in silence most of the way Keig suddenly barked out a question.

‘Did either of you know about it?’

‘What about?’ I asked, hardly believing he was harking back to that scene.

‘About Quiddie.’

‘I knew nothing,’ I replied. ‘Did you, Donald?’

‘Not a thing, old boy. Fred’s a nice enough chap, but we don’t have all that much in common.’

‘All the same,’ I went on, ‘I’m really so surprised looking back: it fits in with his general outlook.’

‘I ought to have seen that,’ Keig commented, unexpectedly bitterly.

‘I can’t say I hold it against him,’ I answered quickly. ‘Poor chap, if it’s his favourite sport, he won’t get much of it soon.’

‘I’m not certain he’s to come,’ Keig said.

‘But why?’

‘It’s bad. The way we’re going to be on the island, mixing with people. He’ll fall for a pair of legs one day and next thing we know the Keepers’ll be all round us.’

I thought about this as the car zipped along the wide Bray road, even wondering if it had not exposed a twisted anti-sex root deep in Keig’s nature. But when I remembered Margaret and the almost throbbing attraction I had plainly noticed between them I abandoned that line.

‘You know,’ I said at last, ‘unless I’m very badly out, Fred took your warning to heart just now. You realize he’s looked up to you as if you were a god ever since you pulled him out of the sea?’

‘Yes,’ said Keig, acknowledging a fact.

He was silent for a little. The lights of Dublin grew near.

‘All right,’ he said suddenly. ‘We’ll take him.’

We took Fred when the day came. But it was characteristic of our enterprise that we also took someone we had not expected to, ex-Sergeant Jack Ascough. Circumstances arose on the very eve of our departure that even Keig’s meticulous planning had not catered for: one of our party caught flu, badly. He could have been dispensed with, except for one thing. He had been chosen for his

knowledge of radio to look after the old secondhand transmitter that was to be our way of keeping in touch with the outside world. I visited the bedside with a decidedly worried Keig and it was obvious the fellow was unfit even to get up, let alone face the next hazardous hours. As we left, Keig's face was so withdrawn in thought I wondered if I ought not to guide him down the stairs. But suddenly he turned to me.

'Will Ascough be at Caveen's still?'

For a moment I did not catch on. Then I remembered: Ascough had been a signals sergeant.

A glance at my watch.

'Fifteen minutes till closing time, he'll be there.'

And we found him and Keig talked him into coming, and keeping quiet about it, all within the space of half an hour.

Poor Ascough, I imagine he must have regretted his decision more than once during our journey to Oceana. Because not only had Keig elected to go in the stormy days of March instead of the summer trip we had had for our previous attempt, but he had also decided to make his landfall not on the smooth beaches north of Lesneven but on the far coast, the one that faced the unbroken Atlantic with a long chain of spiky, carved-up, monstrously-shaped granite mountains. They used to say there was nowhere in its whole length where you could be sure of landing even a rowing-boat, but at low tide there were in fact plenty of patches of granite-chip sand—though generally as little as five or ten yards long—hidden between spikes of jagged grey rock. And Keig had built his hopes on finding one of these large enough to beach the old captured launch which he had kept all along quietly concealed in remote Courtmacsherry Bay.

But it was a terrible voyage out to that coast, despite the seasickness pills that Keig had unexpectedly issued to us—a tip taken, I wondered, from the British general's memoirs I had once seen him read.

And the end of the journey was worse than any of us had foreseen, even at its most storm-tossed moments. We had spotted our tiny beach and Donald had magnificently steered us through a thunderous fury of water to within a few yards of it.

I remember thinking: We're going to do it after all. We have done it.

And as I formed the words the grey sand ahead was, it seemed whipped right away from us.

I looked round. Towering distorted granite cliffs were bearing down at us from either side behind: we had been caught and swept backwards in some vicious, powerful, channelled tide-race against which our engine was helpless.

Keig, you fool.

The words were the only thing in my mind.

And then a great breaker came riding from our rear. In an instant it completely reversed our direction.

Saved, I thought.

We whirled towards the little beach. And on to rocks.

It needed only a touch. One rending jar on our side. And then the green water was tumbling in and the launch's deck simply disappeared beneath us.

As the great mass of sea came up into my face I struck out desperately. Water filled my mouth. I longed for air. I felt weak as a kitten, mewingly moving string-soft limbs. Slow thoughts blossomed in my mind, thoughts about the expedition, Keig, his intransigence, his appalling self-confidence.

But, miraculously, that period of sheer hopelessness lasted hardly a minute. And then I felt my wavering legs thump hard on to something firm. I reached forward and in an instant my arms were half-buried in wet shifting sand. I clung to the treacherous stuff with all my might as the undertow began tugging at me, and when at last it relaxed again I found I was still holding on to something semi-solid. I scrabbled slowly forward. There was no more water. I got to my feet and stumbled on, determined to take myself out of this sea's clutches for ever.

And at last I realized that I must be safe.

I turned round. The edge of the surf was some fifteen yards away, a seething squabbling barrier tossing the remains of the launch—I had a glimpse of the Oerlikon gun—like so many baubles. But unable to touch me now.

And with the cool relief of this thought there came my first unselfish feelings. What had happened to the others?

I took a wild glance to either side. There were figures there, in the surf, emerging from the surf, lumbering, differently coloured oilskin-clad figures. I counted. Four on one side, five to the other. And now three more. Thirteen including myself. All but two of us. Who was missing then? Standing looking back at the tempestuous fury from which I had escaped and from which the others now looked completely safe, I tried to work out who had been wearing what coloured oilskins. We had joked about what a motley collection we were as we had put on the cumbersome garments. But who was missing? Yes, that was it: Ascough.

And in that instant I realized what my mind had been subconsciously balking at: Keig's black oilskins were not there.

A sense of desolation swept through me. He had landed us in spite of everything, but without him it would be no good. That was all there was to it. No good, hopeless.

And then I saw him. He was crouching low, far out in the fury of the surf, the broad black shape. And like a yellow sash across his shoulder there was Ascough's limp body.

I ran without thinking down the squelchy sea-soaked coarse sand towards the surf. But when the snake-like undertow caught my feet I stopped. I could not go forward.

I stood there at the edge of the wild sea staring out at the black figure and the yellow, both intermittently vanishing behind high spumes of frothy water. And I began rationalizing my body's refusal to move forward: I could be of no help, I would only be risking myself and adding to everyone's troubles, Keig was twice as strong as I was. And yet I wished with all my heart that I was advancing into that treacherous, powerful, dazing sea.

I looked round. Most of the others had seen what was happening, and some of them had come down to the water's edge. I turned and stumbled towards Donald, the nearest of them, with some thought of forming a human chain, though even this in these conditions would be dangerous enough.

But suddenly a ragged cheer went up from higher on the little beach. It was swept instantly away by the wind. But I knew what it must mean. I turned to the sea again.

Keig, with that limp yellow burden draped across his oak-tree frame, had found a sandbar and was staggering clear of the surf. Still clasped in his right hand there was, I saw now, his axe.

Part Three

1

So we came to Oceana again. Fifteen men, with only the clothes we stood up in, wet to the skin, battered by the sea, standing in a bemused huddle on the small strip of beach set between the two jagged piles of granite that had nearly been the end of us. Ahead were the cliffs, 150-foot piles of split and savage rock, and beyond these were the mountains, reaching up eventually to close on three thousand feet at the summits, bare and hard, but offering at least plenty of places to hide. And all we had for arms to conduct the struggle we had come to the island to undertake was Keig's axe.

But Keig at least was not bemused for long. He gave the cliffs an appraising look, glanced sharply at Ascough to make sure he had recovered and spoke.

'Come on. If the Keepers have got a watch-point anywhere, we'll likely have them on our tails soon enough.'

The cliffs were by no means a hard climb, thanks to the giant cracks that split them, and as soon as we got above sea-level we found the wind, though strong, was no longer cold. There were even early signs of spring, little hard buds on the tufts of sea-thrift we grasped to haul ourselves up and, when we reached the top, green new grass among the brown clumps that were all the soil would support.

My spirits rose.

Well, I thought, we're here. And that's more than we managed two years ago. Keig may have cut things fine, but he got us to the island. Perhaps I had been wrong to blame

him. No doubt the weather was worse than forecast. He had not been so foolhardy after all.

It was so good, after escaping from that sea, simply to be alive that if I had any doubts I stifled them with a will. The sun broke through, and, as we marched upwards past huge blocks of sparkling grey rock, I started to feel decidedly warm. I stopped and began to hoist my voluminous sticky oilskins over my head. The others, one by one, followed my example.

But just at the moment that Keig's head, topped now by a round cap which Margaret had knitted for him out of some Oceana wool of the same orangey red as the countrywomen's shawls, had disappeared under his black oilskin shroud there came from behind a tall crag ahead the rapid gallop of running feet.

I stood stupid and stock-still. Some of the others, in an irregular line behind me, flung themselves flat on the sandy ground. Keig, I think, tore apart his oilskin in an attempt to free his axe-arm. A sense of flat panic seemed to hold us all.

Then, square in the middle of the sandy path ahead where it meandered round the towering corner of the crag, there appeared, snorting and magnificent, a mountain ram.

It took me several seconds to take in what it was I was looking at. When I did, the utter absurdity of the sight sent a splutter of uncontrollable laughter up into my still fear-constricted throat. I sat down backwards, plump, on the soft sandy earth.

In a few moments the ram was joined by a small group of ewes, more docile-looking but as hardy. They stood in a cluster behind while the ram regarded us all with restrained hostility.

We might have stood like this for ever, except that Keig broke the silence with a low urgent whisper.

‘Quick. There’ll be a shepherd. Get hidden.’

But we were not fast enough. A few of us did scramble behind rocks, but before the whole lot of us had anything like time enough to disperse the shepherd came round the corner of the crag, all as unsuspecting as his ram before him.

He looked at those of us still unhidden. He was a short wiry man of perhaps fifty or fifty-five, deeply tanned, wearing a short dark-wool jacket and leggings with a shapeless hat on his head. His lean face was distinguished by a small purposeful moustache.

He was the first to speak.

‘So it was a boat I saw out there,’ he said.

He looked round. It was almost certain that he could see at least some of the men behind the rocks and for all he knew half a dozen guns were trained on his heart. But he spoke without a sign of disquiet.

‘How many of you are there then?’

Keig stood up.

‘Fifteen all told,’ he replied.

‘And you landed by boat?’

‘We did. But she’s wrecked.’

‘You all got ashore?’ the shepherd asked with quick concern.

‘Yes,’ Keig said. ‘No one was lost.’

‘Then your boat was wrecked close on the shore?’

‘It was.’

The shepherd’s face took on a look of quick gravity. He was a very typical man of those Parts, as I had known them from the days when I had come to the mountains for long summer holidays. They were a decidedly different sort from

the townspeople of Lesneven and the tenant farmers of the rich inland wolds of the island. Where the latter were stolid and self-concerned, the mountain-men were notably quick-minded, quick to see the ins and outs of a situation, quick to see how others felt, quick to feel themselves. I had always wondered how two such different types could have come from the same original stock, but the harsh life of the mountains is an effective teacher.

‘You’d better come with me then,’ the shepherd said. ‘There’s a Keepers’ watch-point up on Trigorrey. They’ll likely have seen your boat, or they’ll see wreckage.’

And without another word he began hut-hutting at his sheep to drive them back the way they had come. It was noticeable that he never even asked us directly if we had come to fight Mylchraine. That was assumed. It told me, and Keig too I have no doubt, a good deal about the state of the country, a good deal that was comforting to unarmed and helpless men.

We followed the shepherd and his active, hardy, dark-haired flock over a distance of some four or five miles till we came in sight of a small grey stone house sitting snugly in a cleft between two gaunt crags with a small clear stream running alongside it. Soft blue wood smoke was being tugged away from its square chimney by the boisterous wind and a line of bright fresh washing fluttered and danced in the little garden between the house and the stream.

At the sound of the baaing of the sheep a well set-up woman of much the same age as the shepherd, plumpish and grey-haired, wearing a wide white apron and with the usual orangey-red shawl over her shoulders, came out of the cottage’s solid-looking backdoor.

‘Brought some visitors,’ the shepherd called down to her.

She smiled in answer but said nothing, watching us in silence as we clambered down the slope to the neat gate in

the stone wall round the house's well-kept garden.

There's plenty of you, then,' she said at last. 'Aiming to give that Mr Mylchraine a bloody nose, I s'pose.'

Once more I noted the quick mind of the mountain-people, and the matter-of-course opposition to Mylchraine.

'Come in, come on in,' the shepherd said. 'We don't generally sit but the two of us to table, but it'd be a bad day when we couldn't find a bite of bread and cheese for as many as wanted.'

And go in we did, and crowd round the broad well-scrubbed whitewood table in the kitchen while the shepherd's wife put floury loaves on to it and a big hunk of goat's cheese.

'And you'll take some heather wine,' the shepherd said, ducking his head into a low cupboard built into the stout stone walls of the kitchen itself.

He gave a short sharp laugh as he stood up again clasping a long black bottle with the cork protruding from its top.

'It isn't the whiskey they're all so pleased with themselves drinking down below,' he said. 'But it's a good wet nonetheless.'

I remembered then hearing that expression 'down below' in my boyhood. It was used by the mountain-men, with a particular rasp of contempt, for anyone living the fatter life of the wolds and towns. And I was interested, too, in what the shepherd had said about whiskey. It confirmed my observations during my short stay in Lesneven two years before.

'So they drink more whiskey everywhere down there now, do they, than when I was a boy?' I asked.

The shepherd sized me up.

‘You’d be a boy some twenty or thirty years ago,’ he answered. ‘And I can tell you this: in those days whiskey was still a treat. People had a bottle at Christmas and thought themselves lucky. Now, they can’t do without it.’

I thought then that, weak and defenceless though we were, it was time we had come to Oceana.

We left after about an hour in that solid stone-walled kitchen with its dark wood dresser lined with gleaming white plates, its three or four hams hanging, black-skinned, from the ceiling, its long glinting cooking range with the small square of orange heat glowing through vertical bars and the big round black stock-pot on top, occasional wisps of savoury steam coming from the edge of its lid. The shepherd’s upstanding wife stood at the door in her calf-length white apron to see us off, smilingly pleased with herself in the knowledge that with no notice at all she had fed well fifteen hungry men.

‘She bakes a good loaf,’ the shepherd conceded when Keig formally thanked her. ‘We ought to have had bairns round that table of ours.’

‘You and your bairns,’ his wife answered, with the friendly contempt of an old quarrel being given a bit of an airing. ‘If we’ve had no bairns, we’ve had no bairns. And maybe it was for the best.’

The shepherd looked up at his square gale-resisting house for a moment.

‘I’d have liked to think a son of mine would live here, all the same,’ he said. ‘But come on now, we’ve a fair way to go before you’re safely stowed.’

He had promised to show us the way to a cluster of caves some way north of his house. They were in an almost inaccessible glen where it was most unlikely that we should

be spotted by the patrols of Keepers who from time to time came through the mountains.

Keig and he had discussed the situation at some length, and it had been arranged that we would lie up in this hiding-place for as long as was needed for the shepherd to pass the word round his distant neighbours and bring us in some of the local lads who would be only too willing to join a rebel band. And they might, we hoped, bring along a shotgun or two, though these were now hard to come by as there was nothing the Keepers apparently liked better than seizing on the spot any they laid eyes on.

We made our way along almost indiscernible sheep tracks under the shepherd's guidance, climbing to a height where heather replaced the grudging grass and from which occasional enormous views out over the green and white-flecked Atlantic could be had. Considering how much at a disadvantage we basically were, it was extraordinary how pleasant it all was. Our clothes were dry now and we had food in our stomachs, the sun shone every now and again and the wind was enlivening. Fred Quiddie started up a song, an extremely ribald one, and the time shot by till we reached the glen.

The place was obviously ideal for our purpose. There was no proper path to it at all and to get into it you had to push through a little thicket of birch bushes growing between two clumps of jagged granite. Once through, you came out into the small sheltered glen with a stream twisting along its length almost hidden in the deep gully it had made for itself. The caves—there were three of them, one large and the two others a good deal smaller—were inconspicuous, being only clefts in the side of the glen at their entrances, though wide enough inside. We ought to be snug here for months, I thought, if need be.

Keig thanked the shepherd again and he left us, calling vigorously to his dark grey sheep which he had driven along with us the whole way. We had promised that some of us would come and see him shortly after dawn the next day, by which time he might have some news for us.

And so we spent our first day back in Oceana. And more and more pleasant, paradoxically, it all seemed. Sheltered in our glen even from the tugging wind and warmed by the occasional short spells of sunshine, we were as comfortable as could be. We tidied ourselves up and washed in the ice-chill water of the dark enclosed streamlet—Keig rubbed his unshaven chin pretty crossly, but a razor was one amenity we did lack—we sat about, we talked, some of us even played a game of tag.

It was all very different from anything I had imagined our early hours on the island would be like. I had not had any very concrete expectations, though I had seen myself as almost certainly firing a rifle, or a pistol—I had never been able quite to make up my mind which of our varied armoury best suited my talents—but now every blessed weapon we possessed, bar the axe, was down among the rocks and turbulent currents of the sea's edge. Yet here we were, relaxing.

Nothing happened. We saw no one. A pair of sentries posted at the top of the glen where they could see for miles in all directions never had anything to report. Keig spent a lot of time with Donald studying a map which he had had in the inner pocket of his jacket, the same tight brightish brown jacket he had worn ever since he paid his last clandestine visit to his own home on the Kernel. Laid out carefully on a flattish rock, the sodden paper had dried out pretty well and Donald, if unable to prevent himself indulging in a welter of sea-terms, had at least managed to locate our position fairly accurately and to identify Trigorry and one or two of the other peaks we could see. And there

was really nothing else to locate, not a village, not a road, not even a river of respectable size. We were miles from nowhere.

Only one tiny incident marked out the whole of that day and our remarkably comfortable night on bracken beds inside the caves. And that came late in the afternoon. It was the sudden thump of a distant explosion. For a few moments it put us all into a flurry, but the lookouts had absolutely nothing to report. They had seen no flash, they could see no smoke. We remained a little uneasy for an hour or so, but when dusk came it was generally concluded that the noise must have been some quarrying in the far distance. A fair amount of unofficial chance quarrying always had taken place in the mountains when there was a house or barn to be built, and this seemed a likely and convincing explanation.

At dawn next day Keig woke me.

‘We’re going to pick up the news,’ he said. ‘I want you to come with me and we’ll take young Cannell.’

Cannell was a mountain-man. Keig had recruited him in Dublin after he had had a furious row with a group of other exiles. He was quick-tempered but cheerful, and young, not much more than twenty.

I sat up and groped for my jacket which I had put under my head as a pillow. A pale light was showing at the slit-like mouth of the cave. I heaved myself to my feet and staggered out. The morning air was cold indeed. I scrabbled into my jacket and in a moment or two Keig followed me out of the cave with Cannell, who was looking a good deal less sleep-bemused than I felt.

‘We’ll be off then,’ Keig said. He gave us one of his rare smiles. ‘We’ll be lucky. We’ll get a fine old breakfast at the house.’

We loped along at a fast pace back in the direction we had come from the day before. The trip, which had taken two hours the first time, went much more quickly and it was a little more than an hour after we had started out when we rounded the crag above the house.

The sight that met our eyes came to me like a brutal slap across the face.

The house was in ruins. The whole square solid structure was just a heap of ignominious rubble. Fragments of stone lay all around the neat garden of yesterday. Even the surrounding wall had been knocked down.

We knew at once what had happened. The explosion we had heard as a dull and distant thump the day before. The house had been callously and utterly destroyed. And there could be no doubt either about why. It must be the work of Mylchraine's Keepers. Somehow they had discovered that we were on the island and that the shepherd had aided us. And they had systematically exacted this price.

And the shepherd and his wife? I began to run towards the ruins. But Keig halted me.

They may have been made to say we were coming back,' he whispered. 'Stay still.'

Cautiously we all three dropped into cover. Lying still behind a clutter of scree on the steep slope of the mountain above the remains of the house, everything around us seemed terribly quiet. The birds had sung their early song as we had been leaving the glen and now in the morning air, hardly warmed as yet though the sun was shining from an almost cloudless sky, they uttered only occasional twitters. After a little I could make out from some distance away the baaing of sheep. No doubt this was the shepherd's flock. They sounded, though perhaps I was being fanciful, disturbed and uneasy still. They would in all probability have been grazing just outside the garden wall when the Keepers

had been there, as they had grazed yesterday while we had been in the house, and the explosion would have scared them badly.

Bit by bit my ears began to take in more and more sounds in the quiet. I could even hear the tiny tricklings of the stream and then the whirring of insects in the tufty grass round about. And finally from across the distant other side of the stone-littered garden out of our direct sight I thought I caught a stifled moaning. I whispered to Keig about it.

He heaved himself up on to his elbows, cocked his head to one side and listened intently.

‘I think you’re right,’ he murmured at last. ‘We’ll go and see, but keep low.’

So laboriously we made our way in a circuit round the remains of the shattered house. I remembered our weekend training sessions in the Dublin Mountains. Little had I thought it would be in circumstances like this that we would first benefit by them.

And then we came into sight of the shepherd and his wife. They had been tied together side by side, each in a sitting position, and a couple of heavy rocks had been propped behind them so that they were unable to move. Doubtless they had been there all night.

The moment we spotted them young Cannell was up and bounding over the rock-strewn ground towards them. If there had been any Keepers waiting in ambush he would have been an easy target. But there was no one, only the middle-aged couple tied up together there.

The Keepers had been artistic in their brutality. We learnt when we cut the gags from the couple’s mouths that nothing had been done to them themselves. Only the Keepers had made sure that they could not help seeing the

utter destruction of everything that had gone to make up their lives.

‘But what are you going to do now?’ I asked the shepherd when he had finished telling us what had happened.

His dark-tanned lean face with its purposeful moustache looked up into mine.

‘It’s not what we’re to do,’ he said. ‘It’s what you’re to do.’

2

For me our walk back to the glen was simply one long sad trudge. I could think of nothing but the shepherd and his wife and of how, simply because they had offered us hospitality, this outrage had been committed on them. Apparently there had been no question of them concealing information about our present whereabouts: it had never even occurred to the Keepers that the shepherd might have retained some link between us. They had spotted our boat from their high watchpoint on Trigorrey; they had gone down to look for any signs of men on the shore and had seen some flotsam from the wreck, had immediately set off in hot pursuit and had succeeded in tracking us back to the shepherd's house, and there they had punished him in their choicely savage way.

'Tracks,' Keig had said sharply. 'We'll have to take more trouble to hide all our tracks.'

But he, I discovered, had not been brooding during our return on what had happened. No sooner had we arrived than he called a council of war.

He told everybody about the shepherd in brief unemotional phrases, and then he said:

'So we'll need guns as soon as ever we can get them. This is what we'll do.'

Then, sitting there on an awkwardly-shaped chunk of loose rock beside that dark, thin, secret stream, he outlined to us in detail the plan he must have been working out all

during the hour and a half in which we had been trudging back to the glen.

We were going to raid a big country house some twelve miles away, down towards the foot of the mountains on the landward side of the range. And how did he know the place existed and would be worth raiding? Simple.

He shot a look at Donald.

‘Colonel Aleyn’s house,’ he said to him. ‘You showed me it on the map yesterday. You stayed there once.’

‘Good lord, yes,’ Donald said. ‘I was just chatting, but you’re quite right. Old Aleyn has Parties there for the shooting in the summer and autumn and spends the winter in England—or he used to. It’s certainly worth a try. I can lead you straight to the gun-room, I dare say.’

‘You mentioned a gun-room,’ Keig added.

He filled us in with further details—the route we would take, the steps that would be necessary to spy out the lie of the land, the best likely time to break in.

An air of excitement stirred among us. Only Jack Ascough, sitting clutching his knees not directly facing Keig, seemed unaffected. He gave Keig a sharp look in which there was no hint of recognition of the fact that only the day before he had owed him his life.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but aren’t we exposing our flank making a long patrol like that on the off-chance of finding a few B2 class weapons?’

‘Do you know of any weapons nearer?’ Keig asked sharply. ‘Of any, anywhere?’

‘No, no,’ Ascough conceded, brushing aside an academic point. ‘But all the same, weren’t we going to wait here till we got some reliable intelligence? I mean, I should have thought that was the way to go about it.’

The quick frown came and went on Keig's forehead.

'And how much do you think we'll be told when people round about hear what the Keepers have just done?' he asked. 'Precious little, unless we show we can do something for them.'

Ascough stared at his knees in silence. No one else had any suggestions to make.

'We'll be off just as it gets dark,' Keig said.

We caught our first sight of the house shortly after ten that night. A single square of light dim in the distance.

Keig and Donald conferred and quickly decided that Donald's vague memories of his previous visit years before had not let him down. A light as far up from the ground as this could only be from a big house and one with an electric generator of its own too. Colonel Aleyn's place was the only one such for miles around. We must be now, in fact, somewhere on his estate. His was the nearest to the mountains of the big properties which shared between them almost all the rich inland wolds. We were no longer in the area where tough independent men owned their own flocks of hardy sheep and lived their own lives. We were on the edge of the tenant-system lands, where large properties—Mr Mylchraine had once been merely the biggest of them—owned big estates and farmed them through law-abiding quiet tenants.

The solitary steady light told us more than this, too. It indicated surely that Colonel Aleyn was in fact away. The big house would be in the care of a few servants. Provided only that guns had been left in the gun-room, we were all right.

Keig made his dispositions. Detachments of two or three men went quietly off into the night with various tasks: to locate and cut the telephone wire—easy enough when the

solitary line would be running through the open countryside on poles—to locate and keep watch on the nearest cottages, to get into the grounds of the house itself and see what could be seen.

By midnight it was all done. The telephone wire was disconnected, the house had been found to be well isolated, a convenient low roof at the back had been spotted with above it a narrow window, bathroom, lavatory or corridor perhaps. The single light was still lit and no others had been seen to come on. Doubtless the few servants in the place went to bed early when the master was away.

‘All the better if they sleep sound,’ Keig murmured.

And we set off.

The night was dark, but not too dark. There was a moon though it was at present hidden by cloud. By now my night vision was very good and when we entered the big garden of the house I could make out almost every detail—the dark clumps of shrub-filled flowerbeds, the broad winding stone-chip paths, to be avoided for their noisiness, and the white-painted greenhouses and solid granite outbuildings. I noted that I was feeling neither fear nor excitement. Indeed, my predominant emotion was hunger: we had had nothing to eat all day. But Keig had detailed three men under Fred Quiddie to make for the kitchens and see what they could find there.

We posted look-outs and Keig himself swarmed first over the low roof that had been chosen for us and up to the narrow window above. Even in the shadow I thought I could see that its glass was more opaque than that of other windows nearby: a lavatory was my guess.

There was a tiny, almost inaudible crack as Keig put the blade of his axe to the window-frame, and then he was pushing it up. A moment later he was inside and beckoning to the rest of us.

Eight of the group were to go in—Fred and his two helpers for the kitchen side, Donald and myself and Keig for the guns, and two others who were to get up to the main roof if they could and act as look-outs for us inside. One by one we clambered up, crept cautiously across to the opened window and climbed in.

I turned out to be right: we found ourselves in a lavatory, rather large, with heavy tiled walls to half its height and a majestic old cistern. Keig was standing just outside in a wide corridor which was dimly lit by the light we had seen coming from somewhere one floor above as well as by its uncurtained windows. He was glancing this way and that, one finger to his lips and his axe pointing dramatically at the floor. I looked down. Shiny polished boards with one small square rug in the distance either way—dangerously noisy.

But the house seemed wonderfully quiet. I could smell furniture polish in the air, a clean sharp odour.

We stood for a few moments in a group in the wide corridor while Donald whispered what he now recalled of the layout of the house to Fred Quiddie and the men who were going to make for the roof.

Then we all set off, gliding carefully along the extreme edge of the corridor in the direction of the main staircase. Most of the big panelled doors on either side were firmly closed, their round brass doorknobs just catching the dim light. I imagined large bedrooms behind them, the high wooden-ended beds stripped and the mattresses in narrow-striped blue-and-white ticking exposed. This Particular house I had never visited; but I had been to a dozen others of almost exactly the same sort in the days when my father had taken us to spend some summer months at the foot of the mountains. I had earlier said something about this to Keig, and no doubt this was why I had been picked to help find the gun-room.

One door in the wide passage was standing open. I glanced into the room behind it. It was a bathroom, and again I seemed to know it before I had properly seen it. There was a huge curly-sided bath standing on four squat iron legs with a tall hollow metal hood at the top end from inside which, after due adjustment of the massive controls, water would spray out at you from all sides, or would have done in the contrivance's prime. There was a solid cork-topped bathroom stool. There was a wash-basin of almost sculptural dignity with a wide glass shelf above it on which a litter of half-discarded objects could just be made out. I saw a tooth-mug, a mop-headed shaving-brush, a tall bottle, a jar or two and an old-fashioned safety-razor.

By my side Keig suddenly darted off through the open door. For an instant I thought we had been spotted. But then I saw that Keig was making purposefully straight for the big wash-basin. His hand reached out to the shelf. He swung round and came out. I saw that he was pushing the safety razor into his pocket. One of his problems at least was solved.

At the stairs we split up, Fred and his team coming down with us to the ground floor, the other two going up. When we got to the foot of the stairs Donald, standing beside the heavy square carved newel-post, pointed to a baize-covered door tucked away at the back of the spacious entrance hall. The kitchen party made towards it and we three were left with the vital guns to find.

We followed a broad corridor running along one whole wing of the big house. There was carpet here, broad regularly-patterned stuff, and the walls were panelled to half their height. Here and there along them hung large oil-paintings, dim landscapes as far as I could make out in the faint light coming from a glass-panelled door at the far end of the passage.

At the last door on the right Donald stopped. He gently turned the brass knob and pushed. The door softly opened.

‘Ah.’

Donald’s exclamation was quiet, but I could hear the satisfaction in it. His memory had not let him down in these uncharted waters.

Keig and I followed him quickly into the room. It was long and narrow with a bare table running its whole length and a few leather armchairs placed rather aimlessly in what space there was left. But what attracted our attention to the exclusion of everything else was the far wall. On it there was a solid-looking rack, and in the rack there were no fewer than a dozen shotguns. Arms.

We hurried towards them. But we were in for a setback. The solid-looking rack was solid indeed. It had been designed doubtless with just such a visit as ours in mind, and designed to frustrate it. The guns were fastened in at trigger-level and also near their downward-pointing muzzles by heavy bars of some tough wood—mahogany, I think, reinforced with thick brass trimming. These two bars were securely fastened by locks built into the wood itself.

I looked at Keig’s axe nonetheless with hope.

Peering at the edge of the top bar, he sought for a crack to insert the tip of the axe-blade. But the two surfaces met as tightly as could be.

Try levering the whole thing from the wall,’ Donald whispered.

I felt a pang of envy at the originality of the suggestion, and while he and Keig tackled the top of the rack, I knelt and began examining the lower bar to see if I could hit on something similarly helpful.

I had no success, and Donald and Keig standing above me seemed to be doing equally badly. The wall behind the rack

was of dressed stone, the universal island granite, and the rack itself was recessed into it.

‘Damn it,’ I heard Keig grunt. ‘If only it was safe to make a bit of noise . . .’

I levered myself up from my kneeling position and stepped back a pace to take a long view of the whole rack in the unfocused hope of hitting on some solution to the problem. I began to feel a nagging sense of valuable time slipping fruitlessly by. I do not know whether it was because of this, or because of some tiny sound I heard only half-consciously, but at that moment something prompted me to turn round and look back at the still open door of the long narrow room.

And there, clear to see in the diffused moonlight coming in through the windows, was an altogether astonishing figure.

It was a parlourmaid, a parlourmaid in full uniform, such as you hardly saw any more in those days in Britain and not much in Ireland. She wore a black dress, a small decorative white apron with a bib, a white cap jutting stiffly up with a line of black ribbon in it, and black stockings and shoes. She might almost have been carrying a heavy silver tray with a letter or some drinks on it. But she was not. She was just standing staring at us, taking in everything with her deep-set eyes in a stern forty-year-old face blazing with avidity.

For a moment I stood paralysed. And then I darted forward. She must be silenced.

But the long length of the room was against me. I caught the inside of my hip on the sharp corner of the table, ran along its length in a series of lopsided bounds in consequence, and charged with arms outspread at a doorway that was completely empty.

I do not know exactly what I had hoped to do: seize the dusty dignified-looking figure that had been there moments before and wrap it in an all-enveloping stifling embrace perhaps. But in any case I was much too late. And the maid had not, in fact, taken it into her head to scream. Probably she knew well that doing so would have been ineffective, that the other servants in the house were no match for us. She certainly looked the sort of woman who would not act in a panic, a stern-faced resolute doer of her duty, one who would as a matter of course get dressed before investigating night sounds.

Out in the wide corridor I felt at once a sweeping breath of colder air. The glass-panelled door three or four yards away was wide open.

I ran to it, Keig and Donald at my heels. Outside, in a small stone-paved yard we stood still for a moment and listened. The sound of running steps scrunching along one of the stone-chip paths of the garden came clearly to our ears. The steps were regular and going strongly, but their exact direction was hard to make out from inside the wall-enclosed yard with its several arches.

‘We won’t catch her: we’d better leave, and fast,’ I said without thinking.

‘No,’ Keig barked. ‘We won’t catch her, but we’ll get the guns.’

He swung heavily round and hurried back into the house.

Running back in after him, I was just in time to see him raise his long axe high above his head in front of the gun-rack. It swept down. There was an agonized crack of rending wood.

‘Marvellous,’ Donald said, hurrying forward.

It needed, in fact, a second and third swipe from the axe at the lower part of the rack before we could get at the

guns, but no more than that. Within a minute of having come back into the house Donald and I were cradling in our arms almost enough weapons for all our small force.

‘Cartridges, quick,’ Keig said, darting glances all up and down the long dimly lit room.

Again I cursed myself for not having thought quicker. I had stood by while Keig and Donald had been attempting to force the rack, and I could have been doing something useful. But worse was to come. It soon became apparent that there was nowhere in the long room where cartridges could be kept. There was no cupboard. The big table had no drawers in it. By all the rules cartridges should be here. But where were they?

‘There’ll be a pack of people down on us in a few minutes,’ Donald said bitterly.

‘Would cartridges be kept anywhere else?’ Keig asked.

Donald thought for a moment.

‘Old Aleyn had a study,’ he said. ‘Might be there.’

‘Where is it?’

‘I’m not sure. But we can look.’

We ran out into the corridor. The glass door still stood ajar. I closed it and turned the key in the lock. A few seconds’ delay might make a lot of difference to us.

Donald and Keig were hurrying along the corridor, no longer making any effort to keep quiet, flinging open doors, looking into rooms.

‘Blast it,’ Donald yelled. ‘But I was never in the damn study. Just saw Aleyn disappear in there once.’

We came back to the entrance hall without having found any sort of study, or anywhere that looked at all a reasonably likely place to keep cartridges. There had just been a drawing-room, all chairs shrouded in white dust-

sheets and little pie-crust tables, a dining-room, very bare-looking with its high-backed chairs pushed against the walls, a broom cupboard, dusty-smelling and empty, and a smaller morning-room, dust-sheeted like the drawing-room.

Just as we had come to the hall Fred Quiddie and his food foraging party had pushed open the baize door behind the stairs. They at least had been lucky: their arms were full of loaves, baskets and bags.

‘Get away,’ Keig shouted. ‘Quick. Out at the back.’

They turned and disappeared. Donald ran across the hall and flung wide the first door he came to on the far side, at the same time flicking on the light.

‘Yes, here,’ he called.

But there was no satisfaction in his voice this time, and I knew why. I could almost hear the trampling feet of Colonel Aleyn’s loyal farmworkers pounding towards the house.

The room Donald had found was more an office than a study, a small place with a roll-top desk in one corner, a tall wooden filing cabinet next to the narrow fireplace and a leather-covered writing table under the window with two piles of dusty-looking papers on it under squat brass paperweights.

‘Take the desk,’ Keig said to Donald.

He turned to me.

‘You can take the table.’

He himself advanced on the filing cabinet and jerked its top drawer full out. I ran across to the table which had two big drawers in front of it with little dangling handles. I dumped the guns I was carrying down with a crash—noise did not matter now—and pulled open the left-hand drawer.

An incredible jumble of miscellaneous objects greeted me. Certainly no boxes of cartridges. I tried the other

drawer. It contained nothing but papers, mostly small sheets with stamps on, receipts.

Behind me I could hear the drawers of the tall filing cabinet crashing one by one on the floor as Keig inspected them and discarded them. I glanced over at Donald. He was deep in the desk, but apparently without result. I wondered if there might be at least a few cartridges loose in the first drawer I had opened. They would be better than nothing. I went back to it.

In my excitement I could hardly distinguish one object from another in all the clutter, ink-bottles, india rubbers, paper-clips, a clothes brush, an electric torch without a top, drawing-pins by the dozen—I pricked my fingertips dabbling among them—a couple of battered-looking cigarettes, three or four old tobacco tins. And at last, right at the back, one cartridge, its brass end dulled, its brownish-red paper shabby. I grabbed for it.

And at once I knew it was empty. I threw it to the floor in disgust.

Then from the stairs outside there came a most terrible clatter. I seized one of the guns on the table and levelled it at the door, convinced that the other servants in the house had banded together and were making a rush at us.

Keig went across and jerked back the door.

‘Quick,’ I heard a voice say, ‘there’s a whole lot of ‘em coming down the drive.’

It was one of our roof guards. I turned back to the table and grabbed up the other guns, too flurried to reason out whether it was better to take the useless objects or abandon them. Donald followed my example with the guns he had put on the floor beside the desk.

‘Did you finish looking?’ Keig asked him.

‘No, not the two bottom drawers this side.’

‘Get out, the rest of you, through the kitchens,’ Keig said.

He turned to the desk and jerked open the first of the unsearched drawers. I ran out behind Donald, across to the baize door and through it, leaving it wildly swinging, and down a short passage to the big kitchen of the house.

I have only the vaguest memory of a dresser and a table, half-seen in the gloom, and of my boots clacking out sharply on a tiled floor as I followed Donald across to an outer door and out into the night once more. He at once began to run hard as we left the house and I followed wondering where we were going.

But I was right to trust his judgment. Evidently he had got the layout of the house and the gardens well fixed in his sailor’s mind because in less than a couple of minutes I realized we were at the place in the surrounding wall where we had originally come in. We scrambled over and a low voice called ‘It’s them.’ The rest of the party were waiting for us, jittery but keeping together.

I wondered what we should do. But Donald was prey to no such indecision. He took over as second-in-command without a thought. Again I envied him.

‘We’ll hang on for Keig at least another five minutes,’ he said. ‘You lot with nothing to carry, fan out a bit and keep your eyes skinned. If anybody comes our way, shout first and run after.’

Obediently four or five of the others set off into the night. But they had hardly left when I saw a familiar bullet-head crowned by its woollen cap appear at the top of the wall.

‘It’s Keig,’ I said, the relief almost making me shout aloud.

But in fact there was not a great deal to be relieved about. Keig’s last desperate minutes of searching had been completely unsuccessful. And so, having tackled the one place within striking range where we had thought we might

get hold of some weapons, here we were with nothing more than one dozen of those most ironical of objects, empty guns.

3

We did at least get back to our well-hidden glen without encountering anybody at all, and I was as glad to slip down its steep sides as ever I had been to drop into bed after some utterly hectic day in Fleet Street or abroad. It was full daylight when we arrived, because of the more circuitous route we had taken on the way back. And we slumped down beside the stream and ate most of the loaves which Fred Quiddie had found in the kitchens of the big house. But even food did not dissipate the depression I felt when I thought of our situation now. I guessed that most of the others—sitting either in silence or exchanging only muttered words—were as downcast as I was. Even Fred Quiddie had not had the heart, once we were safe in the solitude of the mountains, to start up one of his ribald songs, as he had done when we set out.

It was hard to tell whether Keig shared the general feeling of depression. He crouched beside the little deep-sunk stream when we had finished eating and began to shave at the thick black stubble on his cheeks with the little safety-razor he had pinched from Colonel Aleyn's bathroom. His expression was as impassive as ever. I wondered whether I ought to ask to borrow the razor myself or whether I would let my beard grow.

I had just come to the conclusion that I would do nothing about deciding at this moment—the painful process of shaving in icy water and with no sort of soap was more than my frayed nerves would stand after a sleepless and alarm-filled night—when there was a concerted movement from

among some of the others. I sat up abruptly. Something out of key about their action disturbed me, though I could not quite say why.

The men who had got to their feet—there were five of them headed by Jack Ascough—moved over towards Keig.

‘Mr Keig,’ Ascough said, ‘we would like a word, if we may.’

I frowned. The fellow seemed to have a positive knack for doing things just wrong.

Keig felt at his cheeks, decided they were not yet smooth enough, and reached forward and dipped the razor down into the stream again.

‘Yes?’

Ascough said nothing. He stood looking down at Keig’s broad humped-over back as he held the razor in the icy water of the stream. Evidently he did not feel happy at saying whatever it was he wanted to unless Keig was formally facing him. But, when Keig brought up the dripping razor, straightened his back and attacked the stubble round his chin without paying him any further attention, he made the best of a bad job and began putting his complaint in a strained nasal voice, eyes on some distant horizon.

‘Mr Keig, we are not properly satisfied with the arrangements made as per the present time.’

‘What arrangements?’ Keig said, through his stretched mouth.

‘The arrangements with reference to the chain of command,’ Ascough declaimed in the same nasal tone.

Keig took the razor briefly away from his chin.

‘There isn’t any chain of command,’ he said. ‘There’s only fifteen of us, man.’

‘It isn’t so much that, then,’ Ascough replied, driven to a more natural mode of speech through sheer exasperation.

'It's you.'

Now Keig swung round, though he remained in a crouching position at Ascough's feet, an attitude which he did not appear to find in the least humiliating.

'Me?' he said. 'Just what is it you're saying?'

'We no longer consider it right for you to remain O-i-c.'

Ascough glanced round behind him at the others standing there. Now that he had brought it out he plainly felt the need to make sure of his support. The four men standing a yard or two to his rear all looked studiously at the side of the glen beyond them. But they were nevertheless standing their ground. By now everybody, with the exception of the two sentries posted at the head of the glen, was aware of what was happening. I glanced quickly round to assess the general attitude. Fred Quiddie and tubby little Francis Crowe, the barber, were obviously indignant at any sign of distrust towards Keig. But the rest seemed either still puzzled or pointedly neutral, I could not decide which.

If it comes to a fight, I thought, Keig isn't in the best of positions, squatting down there like that and with the stream at his back.

I had seen the quick frown momentarily wrinkle his broad forehead at Jack Ascough's words. But he stayed crouching where he was, balanced on his haunches, the little safety razor in his right hand.

'O-i-c?' he repeated questioningly.

And it was quite clear to me that he was in fact totally puzzled by these initials.

'Officer-in-charge,' Ascough said stiffly. 'Force commander, if you like.'

'And what you're telling me is that I should hand over to someone else? Or do you want us all to go and give

ourselves up to the Keepers?’

Ascough gave that glance behind him once again.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘You’ve only got to look at the mess we’re in. I mean, you haven’t been all that successful to date, have you? It was your idea to try landing at this time of year, and the boat sank with everything in it, radio equipment, everything. And then you decided on trying to obtain an arms issue from that house, and look what happened there. If you’d ordered a proper recce, you’d have found out there was no ammo available, wouldn’t you? I mean, someone with proper experience would think of things like that. And—and we consider Commander Fayrhare should take over.’

It was all out now.

Keig, still without moving, looked over to where Donald was standing.

‘Did you know about this?’ he asked him.

‘Not a thing,’ Donald said clearly and loudly. And I believed him utterly.

‘And if I had just stepped out of it?’ Keig asked. ‘You’d have taken over?’

‘I don’t think the question arises,’ Donald replied perfectly steadily.

‘Yes,’ Keig said, ‘you’re right. It doesn’t arise.’

He swung round in that extraordinary crouching position still, and looked up at Ascough standing straight in front of him.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘you’d better get up to the top and take over from the look-outs.’

He glanced at the group standing squarely behind Ascough.

‘And you, Cannell,’ he said. ‘You go with him.’

It was an astute choice. Young Cannell, impetuous and variable, would have been easily enough won over to Jack Ascough’s mutiny. But equally he was young, and he was no match for Keig’s direct strength.

He looked sullen for only a moment, and then swung off and headed for the place where it was easiest to climb up to the glen top. Ascough looked as if he would dearly like to call him back. But instead he stared down at Keig again.

That’s all very well,’ he said. ‘But there’s a whole lot of us who just aren’t satisfied.’

‘You lot?’ Keig asked.

‘Yes,’ Ascough replied, getting his courage back. ‘Five of us, all told. A third of the group.’

Keig carefully felt all over the skin of his face with outspread fingertips.

‘Five with Cannell?’ he asked.

‘Yes. And you can take it for granted—’

‘Then you’re four now,’ Keig interrupted brutally, and he glanced over to where young Cannell was scrambling along up the side of the glen.

Then he finished his fingertip exploration of cheeks and chin. Evidently he had now succeeded in getting his whole face smooth enough to satisfy him because he began shaking the water from the little razor with short swift jerks of his right hand.

When he had finished he lumbered to his feet and stood, legs apart, looking at the group in front of him.

‘Now listen to me,’ he said. ‘When we went to Colonel Aleyn’s house we went to the only place we were likely to get hold of weapons. It was our bad luck there was nothing to put in them. But we got guns, and when you point a gun

at somebody they're not to know it's empty. So we're about ready to take on the Keepers' watch-point on Trigorrey. And you, all of you, will do as you're told while we do.'

His dark eyes fixed on Ascough.

'Now, get away to the look-out place,' he said.

And Ascough, pale under his sandy complexion, simply went.

How much of this plan to get guns from the Keepers themselves Keig had formulated before Jack Ascough's quickly fizzling-out challenge was made I never knew. It was not the sort of thing he spoke about. I doubt if he had it arranged in his mind in every Particular then because the whole enterprise required very detailed working out. But all the same he must have fixed on the main lines while the rest of us were hurrying despondently back from the almost fruitless raid on Colonel Aleyn's house.

This was, in fact, very typical of his way of doing things. A problem would come up; he would think about it for a little and decide what it meant had to be done; then he would do it or get others to; and as soon as it was done he would begin thinking about the new situation.

And he would go on planning away until he had dealt with every detail, as his method of tackling the Trigorrey watch-point showed. Operating from the glen, a base that seemed secure from discovery, and with a supply of food now to last with care for several days, he at once started finding out all he could about both the watch-point itself and the surrounding country and its scattered inhabitants.

Soon we were able to build up in fair detail a picture of life inside the eight-foot granite wall that made up the mountain stronghold. Six people lived there we found, four Keepers, their Overseer and the Overseer's young wife. There was a

single-storey barracks for the men, a two-roomed cottage for the Overseer and his wife and another small square windowless building which we soon discovered to be the armoury.

Shortly after we learnt this we put into operation the first stage of the plan. In what turned out to be a wildly exhilarating night we threw stone after stone from carefully collected heaps high over the granite wall and into the watch-point. And the moment the Keepers sallied forth at dawn to avenge this insult we contrived to vanish into thin air along various well-reconnoitred routes. Our pursuers never got within two hundred yards of us, and next day spirits were extraordinarily high all round.

They rose yet higher when with dusk that day our sentry on the cold hill above the watch-point reported that all four of the Keepers had later been out scouring the countryside in pairs on their motor-cycles right up until the light began to fail. I think I was the only one for whom even a trace of doubt existed.

When no one was near I put my hesitations to Keig.

‘What if they’ve been visiting some other shepherds like they visited our friend?’ I asked.

Keig’s impassive face remained as expressionless as ever.

‘If they’ve made trouble,’ he said, ‘It’ll keep people on our side—so long as they know they’ll be revenged before long.’

I had nothing to say in answer. But the image of the ruin that had been made of the snugly square house where we had eaten our first island meal was sharp in my mind.

Next day came our bid for the heavy shotguns in that square granite-built armoury inside the watch-point.

Operations began an hour before dawn with a repetition of our stone-throwing jamboree. When it began to get light it became possible to make out individual buildings inside

the fort and, though I have never been much of a thrower, I suddenly began to take pleasure in selecting Particularly well-trimmed pieces of rock and hurling them with all the accuracy I could muster at the Overseer's cottage.

And at last I broke a window. I felt a flush of real triumph.

It was a pretty unthinking sort of triumph, I must admit. As the tinkle of the breaking glass came clearly to me through the thin mountain air I thought only of the Overseer. He was a big raucous bully of a fellow with a quiff of stiff black hair like a boar and a swaggering belly, and I pictured him leaping from his bed in a fury at the sound of breaking glass. I did not at all picture my other victim, his wife, although I felt from my hours of observation that I knew her as well as I knew him. She was a mere girl, hardly twenty I would have thought, and her husband was already leading her a miserable sort of a life, venting his bullying instincts at home whenever he was not lording it over the surrounding countryside. More than once I saw the girl—she was flaxen-haired and prettyish, but tending to be fat and already a little blowsy—scuttle out of the cottage away from him, and even from a distance you could tell she never looked at him but out of the corner of her eyes.

So what she must have felt when there came this new attack of ours on her already precarious security I do not know. But I was right about her husband and his fury.

A minute or so after the window had crashed in he came storming out of the cottage and went over to the barracks at a run. And ten minutes after this all five men from the post went trotting over to the big double gates, shotguns at the ready, bandoliers of cartridges round their chests, green hats with those arrogant cockades jammed firmly on their heads.

They heaved open one side of the heavy wooden gates, came out, heaved back the gate, locked it solemnly and

turned to look for the enemy. They saw us, too. We had taken care they should. And in a few minutes they were out of sight of the gate, running down the mountainside pursuing half-a-dozen teasing, constantly disappearing figures.

As soon as they had gone Keig, myself and Francis Crowe ran out of hiding and attacked the gates. A few minutes work with Keig's axe sufficed. And holding our empty useless guns as menacingly as we could, we advanced into the watch-point. Ahead there was the squat windowless armoury, to our left was the cottage, to our right the barracks. And in the cottage was the Overseer's young wife and she, if our plan was going to work out, must know where the key to the metal door of the armoury was.

Without more than the swiftest of glances round the inside of the high granite-walled fort, Keig marched across to the cottage. He tried the door. It did not budge.

Keig turned to us.

'Locked herself in,' he said. 'All the better.'

The dull glinting head of his axe rose once in the air and swiftly came down. The cottage door shot back as if it had been charged at.

We found ourselves in the combined living room and kitchen. I remember little of it now. There was a table, covered with a check oilcloth, I think. And a range with a glowing fire in it and a couple of comfortable armchairs on either side. And a dresser. There was certainly a dresser against one wall, stacked with the couple's small store of crockery. And the whole room gave the effect of a snug little nest altogether.

But the centre of our attention from the moment we burst in was the girl. As the door gave we had caught a glimpse of her running desperately into the furthest corner of the room,

and there she cowered like a child suddenly confronted by some threat beyond its understanding. It was not at all a pleasant sight.

But it must have been a welcome one to Keig all the same because of the way everything depended on the girl being well and truly frightened. Unless she could be made to tell us quickly where the key of the armoury was kept the Keepers outside might be back on us and we would be caught in the watch-point like rats in a trap with nothing to fight back with but these empty guns of ours.

Keig marched straight over to the cowering girl, put out a hand and jerked her round. Her face when we saw it properly was such a picture of abject terror, mouth hanging open, cheeks blotchy, eyes unseeing, that I was convinced that she was going to be incapable even of speech.

‘Now then,’ Keig said, ‘we’ve come here to get the guns from that little hut. It’s locked, we know. And we want the key. Where is it?’

The girl answered with a single horror-struck whispered ‘No.’

But that was excellent. For one thing it showed she had at least understood what was being said to her but, better, it meant she was admitting there was a key to be found somewhere inside the granite-walled watch-point. This had been one of our fears, that there might be only one key to the little armoury and that the Overseer himself might always carry it on his person. Keig, in making the plan, had reckoned there was bound to be a spare key, and now it looked as if there was one. But where was it?

Keig glared into the girl’s blotchy pink-and-white face.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘I’m going to give you till I count five to tell us where that key is. Understand?’

A precariously gathered resolution could actually be seen forming on the girl's features. She knew she must not tell. And it was plain she knew too that she would.

'Crowe,' barked Keig. 'If she hasn't spoken up by the count of five you're to shoot. Ready?'

'Yes, sir,' tubby little Francis Crowe answered, contriving to sound authentically grim.

He planted himself in front of the girl, his empty gun held in the crook of his arm pointing implacably towards her. Keig stepped back.

And, whether it was that this movement allowed more light to fall on the girl, or whether she herself moved a little as Keig withdrew I do not know, but at that instant it was suddenly obvious that the belly at which Francis Crowe was pointing his steadily held gun was rounded out in an early stage of pregnancy. It was obvious to me. It was obvious to Francis Crowe, I saw, because his gun abruptly was no longer held so steadily. And it was obvious to Keig.

There was a long silence. We faced the girl. The girl, taut in expectation of the coming ordeal, stared back at us. And time went by, time that would sooner or later bring back the armed Keepers to the watch-point as inevitably as the hands move on a clock.

But we had to have that key.

Then Keig spoke.

'Crowe, aim for the legs.'

The muzzle of the gun dropped till it was pointing at the girl's bare white rather flabby-looking calves.

'All right,' Keig growled to her. 'Now where is that key?'

She shook her head a little, as if she could not trust herself to say anything without telling us what we wanted to know.

‘Then I’ll give you till five, or it’s your legs full of shot,’ Keig said. ‘You’re a Keeper’s wife, you’ll know how much that’d hurt.’

The concretely presented threat brought a sobbing whimper from the girl.

‘One,’ Keig counted.

I gave her till ‘Three’ at the outside. ‘Two’ was more likely, I thought.

Keig waited a little. Then he counted again.

‘Two.’

Would she? Her lips moved a little. But she managed to bite at the lower one and hold it. You could see two milk-white teeth just catching the light.

‘Three.’

She moved her shoulders against the hard granite wall behind her as if she was trying to work her way back into it. Keig again left a long pause. It seemed to make the time drag out interminably even to me. I could almost hear the Keepers outside thundering back to the watch-point.

‘Four.’

Keig’s voice sounded like a pistol shot in the little cottage.

This will be it, I thought in a flash.

But it was not. Far from it. It seemed to galvanize the girl into sudden resistance.

‘No,’ she shouted. ‘No, no, no. I won’t tell. I won’t. I don’t care what you do to me. I won’t tell. Never.’

The sweat sprang up on my forehead.

My God, I thought, what shall we do? What can we do? The gamble hasn’t come off. When all the odds were stacked in our favour, when this creature looked so timid, so easily intimidated . . . It just hasn’t come off.

I had not the least idea how we were going to get out of the situation we had placed ourselves in. Keig would have to count his 'Five.' The bluff with our empty guns would be pitifully exposed for what it was. And that would be that.

I glanced at Keig. He was contriving to hold his face as grim as ever. He drew a little breath in.

'Five.'

4

‘Five.’ The word had been said. What now?

We were spared from finding out. A moment after Keig had barked that single syllable the girl spoke. She blurted out the one word ‘Teapot.’

‘What teapot?’ Keig snapped.

‘There,’ the girl said desperately. ‘There.’

And she pointed to the top shelf of the dresser where there was a lidless coloured teapot, a rime of dust along its shoulders.

Keig marched across, lifted it down and reversed it swiftly over his open palm. A heavy iron key fell out.

‘Crowe,’ he said, ‘take that washing-line from the hook there and tie her up. When you’ve both finished, come out to me.’

Dextrously as if he was back putting an apron round some customer in his barber’s chair, Francis Crowe tied up the now wildly weeping girl. I stood by acting out the remains of our charade with my empty gun, though I doubt if the girl would have done anything to stop us now even if we had had no arms at all. Then I hurried out and across to the armoury. Its narrow metal door was already gaping wide and as I came up Keig emerged. In one hand he was clutching a large box of cartridges and two shotguns, in the other he had his axe.

Now we were fully armed.

We found, in fact, even more than the extra shotguns and plentiful cartridges we had hoped to get from the little armoury. There were also no fewer than six revolvers, with plenty of ammunition, and a single rifle. So that, back by ten that morning in our well-hidden glen, I found myself confronting the pleasant dilemma of trying to decide which of our now overstocked supply of weapons best suited my own Particular temperament.

Keig however seemed more interested in the weapon he had had all along. Having satisfied himself we were all sensibly equipped, he marched off alone to the far end of the glen, tossed the long-handled axe once or twice in his upturned hands as if reminding himself of its exact feel and weight and then began again another of those virtuoso displays like the one he had treated me to in the moonlight in the little cove where he, I and Margaret had landed after escaping from the Kernel.

The axe was sent flying high in the air, came awkwardly down flicking its handle to this side and that, was caught at its exact point of balance and sent sweetly and easily flying up again. And as the feat was repeated and repeated, wherever its sharp heavy head was when it descended, Keig's quick-darting hand avoided it completely and seized fair and square on the time-polished haft. Up and up, twirling and twirling, time and again the old axe went till eventually whatever bursting feeling of triumph this display answered to in Keig's breast was stilled. And then he caught the axe one last time, not at the balance point but at the end of its shaft, swung it to his side and came walking over towards us with a sombre brooding look on his face that defied every single one of us to make the least comment.

But to myself I could not help wondering from what deep-harboured thoughts these outbreaks of his took their origin. And I had, too, to admit that in this Particular instance a triumph of some sort seemed justified. Not much more than

a week earlier the fifteen of us had been swept up on as inhospitable a point as could be found on the whole Oceanan shore reduced to only the clothes we stood in. And now we were each of us armed and even had weapons to spare. We had come a long way in a short time.

Just how far we had come was demonstrated rapidly enough. Without fail every day after our raid on the watch-point at least one group of us would set out to waylay a Keeper or a pair of Keepers, never more, at some deserted point in the mountains or foothills within ten or twelve miles of our hidden retreat.

It turned out to be easy enough work. A cautious walk down the mountains and into the area of the rounded clumpy foothills with guns checked and ready for use; the quiet drop into hiding as soon as we saw anyone approaching or at work in the fields; watching in an almost leisurely way till we had seen all that was to be seen about them; then the approach, with one of us going forward while the others waited.

Perhaps our target would be a lonely tenant farmer busy over spring ploughing with a pair of heavy horses, necks down in front of him. First, one would pass the time of day with him, watching all the while as his curiosity grew about a stranger appearing from nowhere. Then one would take the plunge—Keig set me the example, pointing out it was up to us to show trust first—and announce boldly that one had only just come back to Oceana ‘after some years’. This gambit always seemed to produce a reaction, however guarded. Sometimes it would be a slowly expanding smile, sometimes a glint of suspicion quickly checked.

Then, with the smilers, one would begin to ask questions about life ‘nowadays’, quickly coming round to the subject of the Keepers and as often as not landing within a few minutes some sizeable gobbet of information, such as the

route a patrolling Keeper on his inevitable motor-cycle always took on such-and-such a day. With the suspicious ones, the routine—and it soon, to my surprise, did become a mere routine—was to give one's hidden companions some pre-arranged signal, like pulling out a handkerchief, and then after a few minutes saying goodbye and appearing to make off. Almost always the doubtful prospect would be off in his turn within a minute, heading as fast as his legs would carry him for the nearest farmhouse that boasted a telephone, the notion of a reward for 'information leading to the apprehension of an armed outlaw' almost shining in his face, only to be wiped off abruptly when the others in the party suddenly confronted him, weapons at the ready. Back he would slink to his patiently waiting horses, and off we would go to try our luck with someone else two or three miles away.

It was astonishing how it worked time and time again. And the subsequent ambush of a Keeper on a motor-cycle—the shot at the front tyre, the rush from roadside cover to grab the gun, the quick getaway while the upturned machine still spat and racketed in the balmy spring air—this too became a regular occurrence, almost a dull one.

And it was extraordinary to me, though not to Keig who had worked out it would happen and simply expected it, that every time we ambushed a Keeper, or, as we soon came to do, held up a mail van or raided a Letter Office for the money in it, next day three or four young men would come, in couples or singly, up into the mountains to offer themselves to us as recruits.

They came, of course, with mixed motives. Most of them naturally were fired to some extent, greater or lesser, with the same force that had driven Keig to bring us with him to the island: the conviction that Mylchraine had to be deposed. But some were in fact no more than young

hotheads scenting a lark. To all Keig offered the same medicinally harsh treatment.

Hardy mountain people as they were, they needed little of the physical toughening up we exiles had submitted to in the Dublin Mountains. But they did have to learn the discipline necessary for the new life they had embarked on. And this they were ruthlessly taught. Practice took place by the hour in lying patiently concealed in ambush, in deducing useful information from small perseveringly gathered clues and in the careful use of what arms we had. And even more important was the drumming in of the need to look after these weapons.

‘A gun with rust on it is more likely to kill you than to kill a Keeper,’ Keig would bark time and again.

And if anyone were found to have let his gun get even the smallest rust patch—as with Oceana’s customary successions of softly rain-swamped ‘cloaky days’ all too easily happened—that man was deprived of his weapon on the spot and had to earn another in its place.

So our recruits lived a very different life from what most of them had expected, what with training and weapon care and long sessions spent learning about the more distant Parts of the island with an eye to the future and, above all, Keig’s frequent addresses on the whole object of our activities.

I call them ‘addresses’ but that does not at all convey their nature. They were far from the harangues in noble but imprecise language with which many commanders have favoured the men under them. Keig’s speeches took place at no set times. He would simply see a bunch of the newcomers, go up to them and start firing terse questions without preliminary. And when, as was often the case, the answers he got showed his audience as lacking his own undistorted appreciation of what our quarrel with Mylchraine

was about, Keig simply told them, in a few short, jabbed, occasionally word-for-word repeated sentences.

If oratory is the inspiring of specific emotions in the breasts of one's hearers, then Keig became in these few weeks an orator of considerable power. And he was to continue this progress throughout the long struggle that lay ahead. It was all a far cry from his first speech, on exactly the same subject, that had been so laughed at by the Dublin exiles at the meeting arranged to finance the sickly *Voice of Oceana*.

But in the first weeks of our time in the island it very quickly began to look as if the struggle would last at most a matter of months. In the April and May of that year almost the whole northern part of Oceana seemed more than ready to throw off Mylchraine's yoke the moment someone had shown that the tyrant could be fought.

Within a month of our landing we found we were able to abandon the hidden glen as our headquarters. It was no longer worth the long tramps down to the wolds, where the most tempting limbs of Mylchraine's empire were there to bite into, when we could retain complete safety quite easily elsewhere. So we moved down and established ourselves first in a small wood not far from Colonel Aleyn's big house, and soon enough after in a barn at a farm in the wolds themselves. The invitation from the tenant to do this was in itself a sign of how our stature was growing. If our presence there came to light, as it easily might, it was not going to endear our host to his distant landlord. The owners of the big estates in the island were, we soon came to hear, by no means unfriendly to Mylchraine. He was leaving them pretty much alone, and they equally left him alone. As a body they liked things to go on as they were, and it was plain that we were not going to be popular with them.

However the offer of hospitality had been made and we accepted. And so just six weeks to the day after we had landed on that tiny low-tide beach on the far side of the mountains we slept under cover of a roof again and Keig had hot water in the mornings for his invariable close shave.

But it was to prove in the end more than months, much more, before we ever got to Lesneven and that last fastness of the big stone house on the Kernel. Yet it was not the first stiffening of Mylchraine's resistance that upset what had seemed to be such smooth progress.

It came as no surprise when Mylchraine's organization in the northern half of the island was abruptly transformed from a widespread network of Keepers' posts designed to see that taxes were promptly paid, however heavy, into a quasi-military force whose object was to crush Keig's uprising.

Keig had expected this and had laid his plans, and we simply carried out orders we had already been given.

Though this is perhaps to give the impression that Keig himself sat snugly in our barn headquarters and issued instructions. That was far from the case. Keig was, so to speak, equally one of those obeying the instructions—as one Particular incident will show.

It was on a day of premature high summer at the very end of May. The sky was a rich deep blue, even beginning to quiver a little from the heat. There were no clouds at all. The sun poured down with only the half-formed lettuce-green foliage of the lilacs and hawthorns to hamper it. A party of half a dozen of us were at one of the typical isolated farms of the wolds at a point actually nearer Lesneven than we had yet ventured. And perhaps for this reason Keig was leading us himself.

The farm, a sprawling solid building set in a fold of ground between two gentle hills, had an enormous chestnut tree

growing just beside the house. It was in full white candle now, a marvellous sight with the thick spires of flower standing so uprightly among the firm spiny light-green leaves.

We sat under it, Keig, Donald Fayrhare, cheerful Fred Quiddie, solemn Francis Crowe and myself on the one hand, with the others of our party posted as sentries a little way along the road in either direction, and on the other hand the farmer and his three sons with half a dozen girls—daughters, cousins or maids—coming and going from the house, wide-eyed and giggly with the glamour of these strangers.

There beneath that great tree with its flaunting promise of richness to come drawn up from the thick roots plunging into the soft earth beside us, I felt an overwhelming sense of the goodness of life.

I said something to the farmer about how magnificent the blossom was. He grunted appreciation.

‘I’m lucky to have this old tree,’ he said, ‘If she’d been an oak Mr Mylchraine would have had her long ago.’

‘Mr Mylchraine?’

‘I can see you’ve been away from the island all right. Don’t you know he’s had nearly every oak there is. Shipped ’em all off for timber inside ten years. To help pay for all that whiskey they bring in, so they tell me.’

Yes, I thought, the old boy here’s quite right. I haven’t seen a single oak tree that I can remember since we came down from the mountains.

‘Caused no end of bitterness, that did,’ the farmer went on. ‘No one can’t get wood for their pieces of furniture no more. We’ve been having to make shift with all sorts of bits and bobs of timber these last years, and they won’t serve.’

‘I remember country furniture,’ I said. ‘From when I came out from Lesneven as a boy. I used to watch the old men making it when we visited these Parts for the summer.’

It was a tradition in the country districts of the island. No self-respecting householder expected to have in his home any furniture that had not been made by himself or by his fathers before him. And oak had been the wood that was always used. It made attractive pieces too, all carved to age-old patterns.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘let’s hope it won’t be long before what’s left of the island’s safe.’

And at that instant the sound of fast-running steps rang out on the hard surface of the road and our sentry came pelting towards us.

‘Keepers,’ he called out the moment he came in view.

‘Where?’ Keig snapped, jumping up.

‘Coming along the road. In sort of cars or tanks. I didn’t spot them because of the hill, and they’re on the look-out for something.’

While the sentry had been gasping out his news of this development Keig had been steadily looking round about.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘You all know what to do. Get your guns out of sight and make as if you’re working. Go at it quietly.’

And he slipped off his belt and dropped his own revolver and its holster deep into the sprouting grass by the edge of a little wooden fence that separated the farmyard from the road. Then he picked up his long axe, knelt down and began tapping at a sagging post in the fence.

He looked round.

‘You, lad,’ he said to the panting sentry who seemed to be too bemused to know what to do. ‘Up that ladder there and

start taking some slates off the barn roof. And you, Quiddie, get your head into that binder.'

But Fred Quiddie had other ideas. He ran across to the group of hovering girls, seized on the prettiest, tumbled her down on the ground and spread her wide skirt over his gun.

By now we could hear the rumble of the approaching vehicles, whatever they were. Donald, perhaps finding it difficult to throw off his naval officer self in favour of something rustic, sensibly hurried over to the ladder which the sentry had climbed, put his foot on the lower rung and turned his shoulders to the world. I ran across to the binder Fred had neglected and plunged my head into its machinery in what I hoped looked a businesslike way.

After a moment I took a sweaty cautious glance to either side. The whole farmyard was a scene of simple activity, with as a prize touch tubby Francis Crowe. He had run across to the open window of the farmhouse, gathered up a table cloth, swished it round the farmers' youngest son, a tough lad in his early teens, and had sat him down on the chair Keig had occupied. Now with a pair of scissors whipped from a pocket he was busy cutting the boy's hair.

And then round the gentle bend of the road there came the first of the vehicles that had caused the alarm. I saw at once that it was some sort of lightly armoured scout-car. Standing up in it there was a green-uniformed Keeper complete with cockaded perky hat. He had a pair of binoculars in his hands and was using them methodically to scan the countryside on either side. In his concern to miss nothing he scarcely gave a glance at the farmyard so close to the road.

Hot on the heels of the first car another followed, and then another and finally a fourth. Each had, I saw in giving them a casual glance as they roared by in low gear, a crew of five and they were armed not with the Keepers'

customary shotguns but with rifles. Yet something of this sort was what we had expected, and I did not feel much downcast.

It was fully three minutes after the last of the cars had disappeared along the road north before Keig straightened himself up from where within two or three yards of the passing Keepers he had been tapping solemnly at his fence-post, his head studiously bent to show only the round orangey-red cap that Margaret had knitted for him, a garment that one day would be as much of a shoot-on-sight target for the Keepers as a man facing them with a gun, but which at present was simply Keig's invariable headgear.

I thought when he got to his feet that it was typical of him that the loose fence-post should now be trimly in place. I had not so much as wiped the dry mud from my binder.

Gratefully we all abandoned our mock tasks and went over again to the big chestnut tree to resume our interrupted talk.

'I think I had just better finish this young gentleman's hair,' Francis Crowe said. 'We can't have him looking a sight, can we?'

With a mild sense of shock I realized he had slipped back into his barber's shop voice which I had not heard for weeks. Assiduously he applied himself to a little fancy work round the solid neck. No doubt the boy was getting the best haircut he would ever have in his life.

Under the big spire-magnificent tree our talk with the farmer and his two grown-up sons became more businesslike. Keig had his eye on the little town of Carnack about five miles away to the south where there was reported to be a considerable concentration of Keepers.

'If Mylchraine has his men there,' he said to the farmer, 'it won't be long before he has money there to pay them. If I

anyway can, I mean to get hold of that before they do.'

The farmer's eyes widened.

'But they'll keep money like that in the bank,' he said.

'The bank? There's only the one in Carnack?' Keig asked.

'Yes. But—'

'Then we'll know where to go.'

In the next hour Keig gravely extracted from all three of his listeners every item of information he could about the town and the bank and the situation of all the Keepers in the area. And just over a week later, in spite of the presence of the new scout-cars, he led a raiding party that carried away a decidedly hefty sum from that bank. I never learnt the details of the exploit: Keig, judging rightly that the law-abiding residue in my middle-class nature would be made uneasy, told me nothing.

Yet our visit to Chestnut Tree Farm, as I always think of it, was not the complete success it might have been. A faintly disturbing circumstance marred it.

It concerned the farmer's youngest son. When our discussions were over his father laughingly called him over to show everybody what he looked like with his new haircut. The lad had rather gloweringly come up and, reluctantly obeying his father's boisterous commands, had turned this way and that in front of us all. He appeared lumpishly embarrassed by the whole business, and I hardly wondered at it. He was a big youngster and sturdy as could be and he obviously had an even larger share than usual of the contempt for the niceties of personal appearance that most boys feel.

Keig must have sensed his discomfort as much as I had, because he abruptly leant forward with an unusually broad smile—perhaps as warm as any I had ever seen on his dark face—and spoke.

‘Never mind, lad,’ he said, ‘it won’t be long before a great scutch of a fella like you’ll be out and about in the world and all your own master.’

The effect of the remark on the boy was singular.

He swung round from the position his father had last ordered him into and marched straight over to Keig. His eyes were shining with the most blatant hero-worship.

‘Could I come and fight that Mylchraine with you now?’ he demanded.

There was a roar of laughter headed by the boy’s father.

‘What,’ he bellowed approvingly, ‘you want to go and give old Mr Mylchraine a bloody nose, do you?’

But if the father was delighted by this display of bellicosity the boy’s mother, who had appeared a moment before carrying an enormous tray of cups of tea surrounding a tall fruit-cake, was by no means pleased.

‘What d’you mean by poking your nose in?’ she demanded of the lad. ‘You’d be better worrying after your schoolbooks than thinking of going off robbing folk and ending up in gaol.’

This in turn incensed the farmer.

‘No, no,’ he shouted. ‘The boy’ll go, blast it. He shall. Mr Keig’s no outlaw.’

His wife rounded on him, holding the big brass-handled tray out in front of her steady as a rock for all its load and for all her indignation.

‘Then what are all these guns for, I should like to know,’ she said. ‘Going out shooting folk’s no life for a boy only just turned fourteen.’

‘Those guns are to put some sense of reason into Mr Mylchraine, woman,’ the farmer replied.

And the boy, who I was surprised to find, considering the size of him, was as young as fourteen came in lustily with his whack.

‘Anyhow I can use a gun too, can’t I, Dad?’ he asserted.

And then he swung round to poor inoffensive Francis Crowe.

‘I bet I can shoot straighter than you,’ he said.

‘That’s as may be,’ Francis answered, with a little toss of his head. ‘But this business of ours is no job for youngsters.’

But now the boy’s mother, with that superbly illogical changeableness some women possess, veered sharply to the other side of the argument.

‘If it’s decent men you’re wanting,’ she snapped at Keig, ‘then my Alan’s as fit as any. He’s strong as an ox already.’

‘But you didn’t want him to go,’ her husband exclaimed exasperatedly.

‘That was when I thought Mr Keig was only just such another as that Dirk Gilhast, you lummo,’ she answered him.

‘What Dirk Gilhast is this?’ Keig asked, his thirst for intelligence of all sorts intervening.

‘Why, he’s a different sort of case altogether,’ the farmer said dismissively.

‘No. I want to know,’ Keig persisted. ‘Has he men under him?’

‘Oh, he has, he has,’ the farmer conceded. ‘There’s a band of them hiding in the Trigastell Hills. But they’re not honest, Mr Keig.’

I smiled at the unconscious compliment to Keig: scarcely five minutes earlier he had been discussing how best to rob a bank, yet he was honest. Every penny of the money he

would seize would go to pay for food for our rapidly growing force.

However this side-issue was not at all to the liking of the farmer's young son.

'Dad,' he said, 'shall I go and get my good boots on? I am going with Mr Keig now, aren't I?'

I expected Keig, for all that such resolute sticking to the point must have answered to his own natural directness, to intervene here and say that Francis Crowe was right and ours was indeed no life for a youngster. But it was in fact Donald who, after a short pause, stepped up to the boy and said what had to be said.

'Listen, laddie,' he explained, 'it isn't only a matter of shooting straight in the sort of work you get with us. What counts in the end is learning to be patient and keeping a good watch when absolutely nothing's happening.'

'I could do that too,' the boy claimed instantly.

Donald smiled.

'It's not so easy, you know. I had to do it when I was a middie, what they call a midshipman in the Navy, and I found it hard enough, though I was fully sixteen.'

The boy looked sharply crestfallen. And then to my utter surprise Keig simply cut the ground from under Donald's feet.

'No,' he said, 'let the lad try it. Off you go, boy, and find those boots. And you'll need a change of clothes and a blanket too. Nothing else, mind.'

It was a disconcerting thing to have done, running as it did clean contrary to the commonsense Keig had been so notable for hitherto. For a long time after we had left the farm I was at a loss to understand what had made him do it.

Only that night, lying in our distant barn headquarters wrapped in my single borrowed blanket waiting to go to sleep and contrasting my situation there with the well-sprung double-bed of my old London flat, did the probable explanation suddenly arise in my mind.

The lad, Alan, was exceptionally sturdy and strong. He was aged fourteen. If Keig and his Margaret had had a son, he might have been just such a boy as that.

5

With Keig recognized now as a full-blown rebel and not merely another bandit like the Dirk Gilhast we had heard about, the days were coming to a close when our activities could be confined to modest operations like ambushing a single armed motor-cyclist or gangster-like raids on Letter Offices, activities in which, thanks to our Chestnut Tree Farm mergings into the landscape, we had so far been without even a single casualty while the Keepers' losses already ran well into double figures. But though I had hardly realized it, the time had come when, if we were to keep up our policy of never failing to hit back at oppression, a large part of our group—which now numbered about seventy all told—was going to have to be engaged in something approaching full battle with Mylchraine's newly militarized forces.

Keig, brooding on our whole enterprise I really believe in every waking minute, knew this. And, as I was beginning to expect as a matter of course of him, he had been busy with appropriate plans.

The day they were put into effect came in July. It was actually on the fourteenth that our battle was fought: the literary coincidence of its being Bastille Day could hardly escape me, even in the almost dateless limbo in which I lived.

Our first intimation of the test to come was the arrival just before midnight twenty-four hours beforehand of a girl courier from further south. Keig had adopted a system already, which he was later to use over the whole island, of

relying for the gathering-in of information on numbers of couriers, mostly girls who could go about without causing the same suspicions as men. Messages went through a series of rendezvous points culminating in a midnight arrival at our headquarters, wherever that happened to be. It was remarkable how quickly information and news travelled to us in this fashion in the days when we had no other means of communication at all at our disposal—no telephones, no radios, no post service.

So that night first we heard the low challenges of the sentries and then two or three minutes later the courier herself appeared, a solid-looking country girl of seventeen or eighteen, her dark orangey shawl—or was it her mother's perhaps?—wrapped right round her to make her less easily seen in the dark.

'Good girl,' Keig said to her, standing up and shaking her by the hand.

Her eyes glowed with rewarded pride.

'Now, your message?'

The girl crinkled her broad forehead for a moment and then brought the whole message out, memorized word for word.

'A column of Keepers left Lesneven yesterday. They have six scout-cars, forty motor-cycles, a hundred men with fresh horses and sixty remounts with twelve lorries for stores including tents. From talk heard in a drink-shop it is believed they are to go somewhere north of Carnack. They camped last night after going thirty miles. That is all.'

Keig, sitting on a log in our barn headquarters with a candle stuck on a beam above his head, had been jotting down these figures on a big piece of slate he used for any calculations he had to do. The squeak of the slate-pencil had

sounded like a dancing obbligato to the girl's low monotonous voice. Now he looked up.

'Thank you,' he said to the girl. 'They've been keeping a meal for you in the farm kitchen. Good night now, and good luck.'

She left in a positive daze of pleasure at such consideration. Another follower of Keig for life, I thought.

For a few moments Keig himself sat thinking, the slate with its scrawled figures on his knees in front of him. Then he turned to me.

'With as many Keepers as that,' he said, 'they could go sweeping through the country and be bound to pick us up.'

He relapsed into thoughtfulness. After a little I put a suggestion more, foolishly, for the sake of having something to say than for any other reason.

'So we withdraw well out of the way?' I asked. 'We've plenty of time.'

'No, we don't,' Keig said. 'Get out of the way if you're going to be hit, but hit first yourself if you can. What'll people think if we stop hitting Mylchraine?'

'Attack a force of that size? But surely—'

'We'll have to go for them when they're weakest,' Keig said. 'That's sure and certain.'

'We could pick off the outliers when they start their sweep, I suppose,' I replied. 'But it'll be damn risky. Once they know where we are they can bring men up in minutes in those cars.'

'No,' Keig said. 'There's a time when they're weaker than that.'

He glanced up at me, his eyes glowing darkly in the candlelight.

‘When they’re asleep,’ he said. ‘That’s when we’ll do it. Tomorrow night. Have you got the map?’

I produced our only map, which had proved to be a woefully badly detailed affair, and Keig got to work measuring out where it was most likely the approaching column would camp for tomorrow night.

‘Here,’ he said at last.

I saw a stubby forefinger, black-rimmed under the broad nail, resting on a certain point. And then he reeled off the names of the men he would want.

Thirty altogether, I thought. I looked down at the scrawls on the grey surface of the big slate and did some calculations. The enemy would number not far short of two hundred, maybe more.

But Keig’s oak-tree frame was bent squarely over the map again and I was content simply to put my trust in him. Only when, an hour later, I settled on to my pile of straw with my one blanket over me did I ask: But what if he’s a better leader than he is a general?

Leader or general, Keig was up very early next morning and busying himself over an unexpected activity. He set all the men he could find to gathering up old bottles about the farm and even sent five miles to a neighbouring farm to collect yet more. Then he bought from the well-disposed farmer all the lamp paraffin he could spare and half a drum of the motor-oil he had for his tractor. Finally he set young Alan to filling each bottle with three Parts of paraffin and one of oil and stuffing the top with a rag.

At last I asked outright what it was all about. I think the almost light-headed keyed-upness at the prospect of the coming action, which had affected all those named for it, had even stirred Keig’s uniformly phlegmatic nature and

that he had been enjoying mystifying us. Because he replied in just two words.

‘Molotov cocktails.’

I suppose I ought to have realized what the devices were from the start, but though I had often enough heard of the wartime home-made bombs I had no idea how they were put together. I wondered how Keig had come across the formula, and asked him.

‘In a book,’ he said. ‘I made sure you’d have read it.’

I sent off to scrape round for more bottles, marvelling once more at the dedication the man had put into his self-imposed task over the years.

And, damn it, I thought, I bet he’s never so much as seen an ordinary cocktail.

This episode confirmed me, in fact, in an opinion I had begun to form recently about Keig. I suspected that somewhere inside him he had made an advance, or had become confident of an advance made earlier. He was, I thought, happy now as a leader. He still gave little away behind that impassive broad dark-complexioned face, but a smile did more often show there briefly and he ventured too on a little rough humour more often than before. It was hardly light-hearted, but I thought it must mean that he felt it now was less of a strain to dominate the odd assortment of men it had fallen to his lot to lead, some of them by no means tractable characters. He even used our names in conversation, our surnames invariably, with a certain amount of ease now, whereas at the start every time he had addressed any of us it had sounded like a barked command, and a command it would be difficult not to obey.

So I dared to hope that if he had succeeded in making himself a confident leader he would also succeed in adding

generalship to his unburied talents, enough generalship just now to overcome the seven-to-one superiority of the column we were going to attack in less than six hours time.

We were standing in an informal spread-out way waiting for the order to go. But first Keig made a man-to-man inspection of the whole blackened-faced group of us, brusquely asking to see each man's gun, swinging it up to peer along the barrels as the last of the light lingered in the sky. Then quite briefly he told us what had been seen by the man he had sent to look out the lie of the land, and what exactly we had to do.

'Fayrhare,' he concluded, looking across at Donald who was in charge of one of the two Parties into which we had been split, 'I want you to get your batch as close up to the camp as you can on your side. But see everybody keeps dead quiet. Now, what's your watch say?'

Donald glanced at his wrist and stated the time in a flat voice, with no indulgence in his favourite little foible of talking about so many bells in such-and-such a watch.

'Agreed,' Keig said, looking at that decidedly expensive watch of his with which he had equipped himself in Dublin.

He turned to the rest of us.

'Now, two last things. First, none of you's to shoot more than they need when we start firing. A shot's meant to kill. Leave making nice bangs to the Keepers. They've got enough ammunition for Hallowe'en fireworks: we haven't. And second, I don't want anybody on our side hurt if we can help it. There shouldn't be any need. If the Keepers wake up enough to make it hot for us, we'll get away quick. Understood?'

There was a murmur of assent. Keig looked round at us, and his eye fell as it often did on young Alan, whom he had included in his own party as a runner, to my private dismay.

'You, Alan,' he said, 'you shouldn't have to shoot, but d'you understand that?'

'Yes, Mr Keig.'

'And Fayrhare, you'll see your lot remember?'

'Yes, Mr Keig.'

I had long ceased to wonder at the ex-lieutenant commander giving unquestioned obedience to the obscure smallholder, but the comparison of the two answers following on each other now struck me Particularly. Farmer's boy and naval officer they both recognized the same authority.

'Then we'll go,' Keig said without further ado.

And off we went, marching, or rather walking—that's what it was—in a long straggly line with a couple of yards or so between each of us, loping along, guns carelessly held, though with muzzles invariably pointing to the ground. Off to battle.

At the steady ground-covering pace at which we had learned to travel we went through the dark of the countryside, keeping for the most part off the roads, slipping from thicket to thicket, clinging like shadows to one drystone wall and then another. We saw no one. Country folk in the island seldom go about much after dark, and they went about even less at that time when there were likely to be Keepers abroad ready to waylay any solitary passer-by and subject them to a meaningless interrogation in which fists or boots eventually came to figure more often than not.

We Parted from Donald and his group at an easily located rendezvous point, a place where the road we had been using as a rough guide crossed over a stream at a wide culvert. Then the nineteen of us with Keig began quietly walking on again through the open countryside following the course of the stream which, unless our woeful map let us

down, we expected to bring us close to the place where the column of Keepers was in camp.

The warm July night was full of the sweet scents of the countryside, patches of the overwhelming tingly medicinal smell of hazel trees, areas dominated by the odour of the straggly elder bushes in full white flower, or like a low under-burden the scent of the rich grass of the meadows. Ahead of me I could see the dumpy cheerful form of Fred Quiddie, a little farther on I could make out at times the lean shape of Jack Ascough, about to experience 'the real thing' as he never had in all his years in the Irish Army. Further on still, I knew, Keig himself marched at the head of our line. I imagined those deep eyes darkly afire with concentration as he breasted the cloud-wrapped night.

Then I saw Fred pause a moment and slip quietly downwards. We were entering the stream. The camp must be near. As I came to the place where Fred had disappeared from my view, I in my turn slid quietly down into the tepid gently flowing water. I noticed with pleasure that the bank of the stream itself and the tall grasses above it now gave us almost perfect cover if we simply crouched down a little. The approach could hardly be better. I waded forward after Fred's retreating outline.

For a quarter of an hour, I suppose, we swished our way along the stream. A fine rain began to drift down and it was wonderfully peaceful. Concentrating on avoiding floundering over with a noisy splash, I had no time to consider what it was we were intending to do when the time came to abandon the warmish comforting water. I simply plunged onward, step by step, with a little two-inch wave curling past each thigh as I advanced.

Then I spotted Fred stationary ahead of me. I stopped, but he beckoned me on till I was within arm's reach. With the tips of his fingers on my shoulder, he gestured to me with

the other arm that we were to leave the stream and move on our stomachs across the lush grass of the meadow to our right. I nodded to show I had understood and in turn beckoned forward the man behind me.

Two minutes later we began our final approach. Spread out at a distance of four or five yards between each of us we snaked our way across the thickly damp meadow—one knee up almost to armpit level, a shove forward, next knee up, another shove forward. Zig-zaggedly we progressed over the soft ground, wrenching past the tall wiry-stemmed buttercups, leaving behind us twenty broad swathes of flattened grass.

It seemed that there was no one to look down on us from any near-by height. No shattering challenge came. The night remained thick and still. From somewhere ahead an occasional bird chirped sleepily. It was the only sound.

At last we came to a straggling hedge at the top of the meadow. Cautiously raising my head, I saw that at intervals all along the hedge there were the massive flat stumps of recently felled trees, the cut wood gleaming white in the darkness. I made for the nearest of them and found, as I had expected, that it was the base of a huge oak. I knelt up behind its wonderfully substantial cover.

I almost gasped aloud at the sight that confronted me.

Beginning a mere twenty yards away were neat rows of large white tents, standing out clear as ships' sails even in the dark of the cloudy night. They stretched away, each big square tent about five yards from the next, over almost the whole of the large field in front of us. Behind them and to our right, silhouetted against a low skyline, there were parked rows of armoured cars and lorries. The gentle night breeze drifted towards us on the soft rain the smell of horses accompanied by an occasional stamped hoof or clink of tethering chain. The other sides of the big field appeared

to be surrounded by a drystone wall, broken only for a gate into the near-by road. Here by the light of a small lantern perched on one of the gate-posts it was easy to make out two sentries armed with rifles. They seemed to be the sole guard put on the whole establishment.

I felt a tap on my arm. Fred Quiddie was creeping along the line of us indicating with gestures—the one he made to me was extremely vulgar—that we should get our Molotov cocktails ready for action. I peered at the luminous face of my watch. As far as I could make out we had ten minutes to go before, from the distant blacker mass on the opposite horizon that was the wooded spur which Donald and his party were approaching by, the other prong of our double attack was due to be launched. I untied the first of the oil-filled bottles from round my belt and sniffed at the soaked rag in its mouth to make sure it had not suffered in getting here.

I had barely finished checking the last of my bottles and had got back into position staring over the flat surface of the big oak-bole in front of me, with my shotgun comfortably propped in place, when from the far side of the big field there came a sudden, and very startling, roar of sound. For a moment I did not even know what it was. Then I realized: a concerted volley. The battle had begun.

I aimed my gun at the tent nearest me. It seemed almost silly to be shooting at such an enormous target. I fired. The yellow-red spurt of flame so close to my eyes temporarily blinded me, but on either side of me I heard the heavy bangs of other shots. When I was able to see again the white square of the tent in front was disfigured with huge black rips. One corner abruptly sagged.

‘Aim low. Don’t waste a shot.’

It was Keig’s voice trumpeting out from a little further along the line. I felt a momentary sense of outrage that

anyone should shout like that after our hours of keeping silence, till it came to me that far from needing to conceal ourselves we now had to make our presence felt as noisily as possible.

‘Quiddie and Ascough,’ Keig called. ‘Follow me with five cocktails each. Keep your fire to the left, the rest of you. We’re going for the cars.’

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the lean figure of Jack Ascough stoop behind me to gather up the Molotov cocktails I had stood there side by side. A minute later the three raiders got over the wall at the corner of the field, quick as rats, and vanished into the darkness, now all the more intense for the bright spurts of flame from our guns. Hastily I reloaded both my barrels, shifted my stance till I was aiming well to the left, picked on a new tent as target and fired twice in quick succession.

By now the Keepers had been stirred into action. There were yells, often as much of fury as of pain as far as I could judge, and dark shapes began blundering out of the tents, one of which had caught alight and begun to illuminate the whole scene with high-flickering tongues of flame.

Then someone among the panicking shapes of the enemy succeeded at last in doing something to retaliate. I saw a sharp hard flash of fire and almost at the same instant there was a heavy thud on the oak-bole in front of me. But it did not really register with me that I had been shot at, that someone there in the confusion in front had taken a rifle and had attempted to kill me.

I slipped behind the wide tree-stump, extracted another couple of cartridges from the improvised bandolier over my shoulder and slid them into the double breech of my gun. When I bobbed up again the scene before me was more confused than ever. The burning tent was now almost a total mass of flames and lit up quite a considerable area of the

surrounding camp. I could make out men running from point to point, ducking and stooping as they went. I noted with pleasure that some were running one way while others ran in precisely the opposite direction. There was a great deal of shouting, a little of which only was in the form of barked orders, easily distinguishable amid all the noise of other yells, the unceasing banging of guns by my side, the roar of flames and from time to time the distinctive sound of rifle fire.

Bullets now began to come whining and ricocheting around us. But to my mild surprise I felt only a sense of exhilaration. I was under fire. It was the classic phrase I had so often read. But all I could really think about was that I was not being hit. I took this as a matter of personal pride and stayed up above the oak-bole, loosing off and reloading as quickly as I could and trying to remember each time I fired to pick on a target and shoot at it, in obedience to Keig's dictum. Yet, even though I was aiming at the figures of men I could not feel I was wounding, perhaps killing, anybody. The whole episode seemed floatingly unreal, and so it remained. I have since discussed, with some curiosity, with other people their battle experiences and I gather this odd state is not as unusual as I then felt it to be.

Now, however, a new note was added to the chaos in front of me: there came a sudden enormously bright flare, followed almost at once by a heavy crump.

The armoured cars, I thought. Keig's got among them with his famous cocktails.

Three more bright flashes with only two succeeding crumps followed. One dud, I registered. And then there was an outburst of very rapid rifle fire from the direction of the vehicle park and a lot more shouting.

I went back to the business of banging away with my shotgun at any shape I could decently see in the wild scene

in front of me.

A few minutes later I spotted two dark figures mounting the wall at the corner of the field. For a second I took no account of them. Then as they one after another dropped to the ground and were lost in the darkness I was flooded by a sudden fear that this was the enemy. The next instant another shape appeared momentarily on the wall, outlined by the flames from the distant vehicle park. It took me no more than that moment to recognize a familiar oak-broad form. Keig.

I experienced a great surge of warmth.

Apparently the three of them were being pursued, or had been seen by some of the Keepers recrossing the wall, because just then a savage outburst of firing came from that direction and I saw Keig and the others, whom I had just begun to make out again as they came towards me, stop, turn and raise their pistols to return the fire. I swivelled round myself, reloaded once more—the bandolier over my shoulder must surely be nearly empty, I thought—and peered into the confusion looking for a target.

In doing so, I failed entirely to notice that farther along in the other direction a group of Keepers had got together and rushed a gap in the straggly hedge we were lining. The first I knew of them was suddenly feeling what seemed like a knock from a heavy fist on my left hand. My gun went spinning from my grasp.

‘What the—’ I exclaimed, wheeling round.

And then I realized what had happened to me. Not fifteen yards away a small knot of Keepers was kneeling with rifles up to their shoulders. And one of their shots had hit me. Wounded me.

I leapt up like a chamois and bounded away into the darkness of the meadow behind me.

By the time I had gone ten or twenty yards, charging through the wet knee-high grass, I realized that I was out of the shooting Keepers' view. I stopped and turned round.

The Keepers—there were only three of them—were still kneeling there, plain to see against the wild background of flames in the camp beyond. They looked like an illustration from some history of the Boer War in precise black-and-white. Each of them was kneeling on one knee, holding himself very upright, the outline of his Norfolk jacket quite clear and that of the absurd peaked hat with its bunch of pheasant feathers in the side. Each had his rifle properly tucked into his shoulder and was firing at regular intervals.

But by now there was no one left to fire at. The others of our party, mindful of Keig's instructions not to get involved in a pitched battle when they could avoid it, had simply vanished into the dark meadow as I had done, though with more purposefulness.

And now, close to me, I distinguished the broad-shouldered form of Keig.

'Hello there,' I said quietly. 'I've been hit.'

Until that moment I had, in fact, scarcely taken account of my wound. But knowing Keig was safe now brought it back to me and I held up my hand, which was throbbing a little but hardly at all painfully, in front of my face. To my intense surprise I saw that the top section of the ring finger was dangling from a thin strip of flesh.

I felt a surge of fury. How dare they. I looked round for my gun, incoherent thoughts tumbling through my head of blazing back at them for what they had done to me.

'My gun,' I exclaimed without thinking, 'they've made me lose that too.'

'Your gun?' Keig said in my ear, speaking urgently and sounding subdued angry. 'You dropped it?'

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Damn it, by the hedge there.’

‘Wait.’

And without an instant’s delay Keig dropped to his belly and set off at a vigorous crawl through the rain-heavy grass.

Oh God, I thought, I’ve made him go back into where they’re shooting. He’ll be killed.

And it was true that the three Keepers were still solemnly shooting into the empty darkness. What Keig had said in one of his lumpy jokes about them earlier was certainly true: they had enough ammunition to make a Hallowe’en celebration that would last all night.

And then suddenly they stopped and, all three at once, flung themselves face-down flat. By my side I heard the rapid banging of shotguns. The rest of our party had appreciated the situation and had taken action.

Two minutes later Keig was back with us. He was holding my gun.

‘Here,’ he said, ‘can you carry it?’

‘Oh, yes,’ I answered, a true and wild joy leaping up in me. ‘So long as I don’t have to shoot with it.’

Keig ignored my childishness.

‘Come on then,’ he said. ‘We’ve done what we came here for. The sooner we’re on our way the better. I don’t want to end the night by finding we’ve had someone killed.’

And he swung off into the dark in the direction of the slight but adequate hiding place provided for us by the stream.

Twenty minutes later, after wading upstream much faster and less cautiously than we had slipped downstream before the attack, we emerged from the water and gathered in a

sodden-legged but electrically cheerful group under cover of a clump of elder bushes.

Keig, who had brought up the rear, was the last to join us.

‘They haven’t tried to follow at all,’ he said, the flatness of his tone contrasting sharply with the incessant jokiness of the rest of us.

He turned to me.

‘That finger,’ he asked, ‘should we try to get you to a doctor for it?’

‘Doctor, nothing,’ I replied light-heartedly, ignoring to my later shame the real concern Keig had expressed. ‘I fixed the whole thing by trailing the stub in the water as we came along. I think it’s even stopped bleeding now.’

I felt, in fact, wonderfully light-hearted, a nonchalant Douglas Fairbanks type hero making light of my wounds in what had turned out to be, after all, a curiously celluloid business.

‘It’s one of my best typewriting fingers, of course,’ I went on. ‘And I shall never bring the same subtle accuracy to my pieces again, but—’

‘Quiet,’ Keig hissed.

I thought at first that he was simply taking rather excessive precautions to make sure no one spotted us and, though I did not dare flout him, I mentally indulged in a few disloyal remarks about sometimes being too ploddingly careful.

But Keig had shut me up for quite a different reason.

‘Yes,’ he said after a moment, ‘I thought it was. There’s still firing from the camp.’

We all concentrated hard on listening then. And, sure enough, from the direction of the distant wrecked camp a

steady patter of gunfire, like the tocking of some night-beetle, could be heard.

‘Damn,’ Keig said, with more bitterness than I had heard from him before.

We stood, suddenly much more subdued, and listened again to that distant irregular patter of sound. A sharp uneasiness ran from one to another of us. There ought not to be firing now.

I peered at my watch in the darkness and made some calculations. To my surprise I found that the whole battle, with all its wild confusion and with all the damage we had inflicted, could not have lasted much more than a quarter of an hour, on our side of the camp at least. But why had it apparently gone on for over half an hour on Donald Fayrhare’s side?

‘Quine,’ Keig said to me abruptly. ‘I want you and young Alan to go to the meeting place and wait there one hour past the final time but no more. The rest of us’ll go and see if we can find out what’s happening.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘Come on, Alan.’

The boy and I made our way back along the route we had taken earlier. Deprived of the invisible strength that came from Keig’s presence, I began to feel unsure of myself. I soon became convinced I would somehow fail to find the place we were to wait at where the stream ran through the culvert under the road. And my finger began to hurt too. The last dregs of exhilaration oozed rapidly away.

But I pushed on and young Alan followed apparently oblivious of my lack of confidence. And one by one the landmarks I had forgotten came up, and before long we reached the culvert and I settled down to wait in its shadow. Young Alan, who was still in a state of high euphoria, was by no means content to stand in the darkness of the culvert

however. A patch of blayberries grew on the road embankment and he ranged about scrabbling at it looking for early fruit. And whenever he did come back to where I was hiding he resumed a ceaseless prattle about wishing we had stayed at the camp till we had killed 'every last one of the bastards'. He must have used those exact words twenty times at least.

At last, darts of pain seeming to shoot up in the whole length of my arm with every pulse of my blood, I could stand it no longer.

I swung my gun round with my good hand and pointed it straight at the poor boy.

'Shut up,' I said. 'Shut up and stay right where you are beside me or, by God, I'll let you have it.'

After that we stood there, the pair of us, at the edge of the wide round culvert in total silence with only the stream lazily chuckling at our feet in the darkness. Poor Alan watched me positively unblinkingly, as if he had unexpectedly found himself locked up in a cage with a python.

Our stay in these circumstances extended up to within a few minutes of the agreed time of departure. Then I heard more purposeful noises in the warm night than the faint rustlings that had been all that had so far disturbed us. Even Alan took his eyes off me.

We clambered cautiously a few feet up the embankment and looked about. A moment later there came a soft call. It was Keig.

I hurried up on to the road and saw to my relief that, stringing out behind him, there were more than the eighteen men he had set off with to find Donald.

'Everything okay?' I asked.

'No,' Keig said. 'Fayrhare's wounded. Badly.'

At that moment two of the men came stumbling through the darkness with a heavy slack form supported between them. Even at a first glance I thought there must be very little hope.

‘What happened?’ I asked Keig.

‘He didn’t make an end when the Keepers started to get a mite clever again. He was hit just before we reached them.’

He told me no more, then or later. It was only from the others that eventually I discovered what had in fact taken place: that Keig had come up with his party when the rest of Donald’s group had already begun to run off in a panic after he had been hit and laid low. Keig had simply said that he would go back and get him. And, with two of the newcomers, that was just what he had done. They had gone charging down at the small group of Keepers standing over Donald, yelling like dervishes. The Keepers had scuttled off and Keig and the other two had picked up Donald’s unconscious body and had made their way back, only eluding pursuit from the Keepers after a mile or more of hard running.

Now we picked a near-by clumsy field gate off its hinges and, with one of us at each corner and Donald’s unmoving form stretched in the middle, we set off for our old headquarters, which we had planned to move that night before the Keepers could retaliate for the attack on the camp. It was a much less happy journey than I had thought it would be when we had re-entered the so useful stream after our share of the battle. But we at least made good time.

We were within a quarter of a mile of the farm and the cows in the fields round about were beginning to rise to their feet in the pre-dawn restlessness when, at the end of one of my turns as a carrier I put my hand on Donald’s chest

where from time to time I had felt the slow irregular beat of his heart. I felt it no longer.

‘Keig,’ I called out. ‘He’s dead.’

The men who had picked up the gate ready to move off for the last lap lowered it to the ground again.

Keig came up and stood looking down at Donald’s body for what seemed a very long time, in complete silence. Then he lifted his head and glanced sharply about him in the before-dawn chill.

A small spinney lay about fifty yards away at the top of a gentle rise. It consisted, I suppose, of four or five big beech trees, making a patch of dark untillable ground. We had been accustomed to post one of our sentries in it. Now Keig pointed across towards it.

‘Bury him there,’ he said brutally. ‘And be quick about it.’

6

Fred Quiddie, who had been one of the four waiting to carry Donald on to our temporary headquarters in the scarcely expressed hope that something might be done for him, wheeled sharply round. He did not speak, but the violence of his movement expressed more clearly than words the shock he had felt at Keig's brusque direction to bury at once and ignominiously the man who had for so long been very much one of us.

It was Jack Ascough, well reconciled to Keig's leadership but never reconciled to the non-observance of the formulae he had learnt in his army days, who was the one to put the general objections into words.

'But, sir ...' he said.

Sir. No one but Ascough, and he only when thus caught off guard, ever addressed Keig as 'sir'.

'But, sir, we can't hope to organize the proper ceremonial here and now, sir.'

Keig turned a totally inexpressive face towards him.

'There isn't any proper ceremonial,' he said. 'Fayrhare's dead, he's got to be buried. The spinney'll suit nicely.'

There was a shimmer of protest among those gathered round the heavy gate we had lugged, with its heavy burden, all that way. It took the form of no more than half-exchanged glances and men taking half a pace backwards, but I saw it was nevertheless serious. I decided that, for once, I must take advantage of my friendship with Keig—if friendship was

the word for the link between us—and try to intervene with him.

‘Keig,’ I exclaimed quickly.

The impassive face, broad of brow, deep-eyed, turned towards me in the fast growing light of this new and blackly depressing day.

‘Look,’ I said, ‘Donald was with us from the very earliest time. And he did damn well by us. I know he made a mistake last night, a bad one if you like. He disobeyed orders, and there’s no excuse for that. But you’re punishing him when he’s dead. For all our sakes, let us give him what decent burial we can.’

I thought I saw a flicker in Keig’s eyes. But, if I did, I was mistaken about its meaning.

‘You’re a fool,’ he burst out harshly. ‘D’you think I’d do that? Take revenge on someone dead for not obeying an order?’

‘Well then, what?’ I asked. ‘Why do you want him shoved away like this? Damn it, like a dog.’

For a moment or two Keig stood there in front of me. For the first time I saw him completely at a loss. He actually shifted from one foot to the other. But before long he forced himself to speak.

‘It’s not that,’ he said, as if each word had to be quarried from the rocky core of his mind. ‘No, it’s not that. Though I see how you thought it was. I ought to have made it clearer like. It wasn’t that. It was . . .’

A frown stood out on his forehead, and for once stayed there.

‘It was this,’ he went piecemeal on. ‘Fayrhare’s dead. Never mind how he came to die, he’s dead. He’s fin—He’s no more, gone. If there was time—If this was ordinary days,

I'd go to his funeral like I'd go to any other man's. But this isn't an ordinary time. All that's put away. There's only one thing now: to topple Mylchraine. And we've got to look ahead, see what's next. Always. And Fayrhare's not next, he's last. Poor soul, he's over and done with now.'

His face, looking straight at me, seemed almost split across by that deep-sunk frown.

I turned away.

'Pick up the gate,' I said to the others. 'We must bury him straightaway. It's the right thing.'

And bury Donald before, weary and miserable, we packed up our scanty headquarters and moved off to a safer area, we did. I do not know how many of those who helped dig a shallow grave among the fibrous roots in the beech spinney agreed with me—not a lot to judge from murmurs I heard later—but some of them did, and I was not going to see Keig troubled more if I could help it.

As I stood watching the mean business of scuffling out that grave in the soft earth—my little wound excusing me from taking an active share in the work—I realized to the full what extra strain a leader must bear, and especially a solitary leader like Keig and one unsupported by any traditions of correct conduct in such circumstances.

I knew, too, that there would seldom be anything I could do to help him here.

But, if the day after the battle had seemed as black as any I had experienced since that extraordinary and distant evening when I had first met Keig in the lurid surroundings of the Rota, the blackness was only temporary. Donald's death sent a heavy shadow indeed over those of us who had known him from the start, but it was a shadow rapidly chased away by the irresistible push of events. Because the

battle in which he had died proved to be even more of a defeat for Mylchraine than even the substantial number of casualties we turned out to have inflicted should have warranted.

Evidently unable to believe that such a drubbing could have been inflicted on the cream of his Keepers by any force smaller than his own, he at once assumed that he had been misinformed about the whole character of Keig's revolt and acted as if a substantial army had been brought into the field against him. He rapidly withdrew all his remaining strength, which was of course considerable, to Lesneven and the southern half of the island. So that on our Part, far from retreating to the safety of the mountains as we had expected we would have to do to avoid reprisals, we simply advanced farther and farther southwards, entirely unopposed.

Within a week of the night of the battle we had set up our headquarters with perfect confidence in the little town of Carnack, some miles south of the actual scene of the attack on the camp. And all this at cost to us of one killed and one, myself, wounded, if such a minor injury—the fingertip was already healing well—could qualify as a wound.

In Carnack we had even installed ourselves under a roof, that of the town's single small hotel. I think it was from this time, in fact, that an incongruous mental picture I have of Keig must date. I see him sitting on the bed in a hotel room with a slate-topped wash-table drawn-up in front of him to work at, a tough-looking bandoliered figure firmly planted on a flower-patterned counterpane with his long-handled axe on the bed beside him.

It was certainly from the bar of this hotel that I rang up Peter Cormode in Dublin.

It was an odd business from the start. We were sitting in the bar-room which also served as a dining-room for the

occasional guest the hotel had. There was no one else there except Francis Crowe and the landlord, a lank-faced lugubrious character with two great hanks of dark moustache, with young Alan lying fast asleep on one of the side-benches. Only Fred Quiddie of what might be called our regular headquarters staff was absent. Town life, even the life of such a staid little town as Carnack, was exercising its old fascination on him and he was off somewhere—what doing, in view of Keig's strict attitude to camp-followers, I did not dare think. Certainly, however, if he wanted social activity even of the most innocent kind he had to go out for it, because not one of the townspeople ever ventured into the hotel after we had adopted it.

Keig, in fact, said something about this to the landlord.

'We're only guests here the same as anybody else, you know.'

As indeed we were, since Keig was punctilious in settling up for everything we had, solemnly conducting an accounting with the landlord at the end of each day. But if his message was passed on at all, it certainly had no effect. The citizens of Carnack shunned us. I was not altogether surprised: they seemed to be, even more than people in the surrounding wolds, stolid keepers-to-themselves, impossible to stir, dourly determined to stick to the firm routine of their lives, stony-eyed in face of all appeals. And we carried our war-like atmosphere around with us like a powerful cat-odour.

So there we were alone in the bar, Francis Crowe and I having an after-supper drink, Keig abstaining. And then, shrilling over our quiet talk, the telephone on the wall close to the bar rang out sharply.

The landlord moved across to the instrument in an instant and whipped the old-fashioned separate ear-piece off its hook.

‘Wrong number,’ he barked.

Keig got up from our table and went over to the telephone.

‘I didn’t know that was working,’ he said.

‘Why wouldn’t it be working?’ the landlord replied. ‘Not that anyone would have anything to ring through here about.’

He darted Keig a look of sombre triumph over the depth of the misery he felt himself reduced to. The gesture turned out to be one he must have wished he had not indulged himself in.

‘So we could use this to talk to anywhere?’ Keig pounced, jabbing a blunt forefinger at the phone.

‘Suppose you could,’ the landlord conceded. ‘But where would you want to talk to?’

A look of fright had appeared in his lacklustre eyes at the idea of such a villain as this speaking from his hotel.

‘Dublin,’ Keig said. ‘We’ll talk to Dublin.’

I will admit I was as astonished as the landlord. But a moment’s quick reflection showed me that, given the half-war, half-peace state of the northern part of the island, it was quite conceivable for a telephone here still to be capable of being connected to Dublin. Only one would never have thought of it, except that Keig had. And in doing so he had dealt with the problem of being totally cut off from the outside world that we had suffered from ever since our famous radio-transmitter had been battered to pieces in the sea.

Now Keig beckoned me over.

‘You used to remember the number of Caveen’s Bar,’ he said.

‘Caveen’s?’

‘Yes, I want you to talk to Cormode for me. And that’s where he’ll be now, isn’t it?’

I looked at my watch. Nine o’clock. Yes, I supposed, just at this time almost certainly Peter Cormode and his cronies would all be ensconced in the snug at Caveen’s Bar. They used to be there every evening without exception. No doubt they would still be there. After all, it was really only four months or so since we had seen them.

‘But why me, talk to him?’ I asked Keig.

‘Because I’m not used to these things,’ he said, jerking a nod at the telephone.

‘All right. What do you want me to say?’

Keig went back to the table and fetched his big piece of slate. He was later to abandon this curious but effective method of keeping temporary notes, but at a time when pieces of paper mercifully did not much come our way it served its purpose admirably.

On it now he noted down a list of the points he wanted making to Peter Cormode as we discussed them in whispers. When he had finished I turned to a quite forgotten area of my brain and from it I produced the Dublin telephone number of Caveen’s Bar. Heaven knows I had rung up Cormode there often enough in the days when I had had nothing better to do than assist him with his plans and dreams. But the number seemed now to be a piece of obscure information about life on another planet.

I turned to the telephone, propping the big piece of slate against the wall on top of the little varnished box, took the earpiece off its hook and put it to my ear.

‘What number are you wanting?’ a voice answered quite promptly.

I gave the Dublin number.

‘Hold on then,’ the operator said.

I stood there waiting, thinking to myself that never since the age of ten, say, had I gone for four whole months without making a single phone call. Keig in the meanwhile was quietly but firmly putting the lugubrious landlord out of the room.

‘But who’s to pay for all this?’ I heard the man protesting.

‘We’ll pay and you know it,’ Keig answered.

Querulous muttered remarks about not forgetting to ask the cost of the call were still going on at the door when into my ear there came suddenly a thick Dublin voice.

‘Caveen’s Bar.’

One of the Irish ‘curates’ the Oceana-born Caveen had employed.

I gulped.

‘Is Mr Cormode there?’ I said, blurting it out and feeling a fool.

‘Sure. Hang on.’

And it was as easy as that. A few moments later a familiar voice sounded in my ear.

‘Peter Cormode speaking.’

‘This is Michael Quine,’ I said.

‘Who? Who? Who’s that?’

‘Michael Quine. I’m speaking from Oceana.’

There was silence at the other end. I thought I might have lost the connection. But then Cormode spoke again.

‘Michael? It’s you? I thought you were dead.’

‘Far from it. Alive and well.’

‘But where are you? Can you speak to me?’

‘I am speaking to you,’ I answered, growing more elated with every second the call lasted. ‘I won’t tell you just where we are, though. Someone between me and you may be listening in. We’re in the north of the island, not all that far from Lesneven.’

‘You’re on your own? You’ve not been captured?’

‘Of course not.’

At the far end Cormode began babbling hard. I gathered that we had been well and truly written off when our departure for the island had leaked out and complete silence had followed. Finally Cormode sorted himself out a little.

‘Well, my heartiest congratulations,’ he said. ‘And you’re quite safe from capture?’

‘I should hope so,’ I replied tartly. ‘Keig has a force of pretty well a hundred men now, and more coming in daily. The Keepers are packing it in fast.’

I felt I owed it to Keig to paint as rosy a picture as possible within the bounds of truth, and I was enjoying rubbing in the details. But Keig, who had come back from dealing with the landlord, now hissed deafeningly in my free ear.

‘Weapons.’

I nodded.

‘But, look, Peter,’ I said, ‘this is by way of being a business call. There’s certain things we want you to get to us.’

‘Oh, yes?’

Cormode sounded abruptly wary.

‘Mylchraine’s been buying armoured cars,’ I said. ‘We’ve put some of them out of action, but we haven’t got any guns that can really deal with them. Keig’s most anxious to get hold of some.’

I had thought earlier, without going into things very carefully, that the scout-car menace was over. But Keig had surprised me while he was giving me his list of points to raise by the vehemence with which he had insisted on our need for more powerful guns.

In Caveen's Bar in Dublin Cormode was humming and hawing.

'Well, listen, Michael, I'll certainly do my best to see what can be done. You can rely on that. But in the meanwhile give me more details of what you've done so far. A force of a hundred men, did you say? We must get that to the papers.'

'All right. That's no bad idea. You can tell them that we attacked a column of some two hundred Keepers in camp to the north of Carnack. You know Carnack?'

'Yes, yes. I was through it once.'

'Well, we destroyed six armoured cars in a night engagement there, as well as a large number of lorries and motor-cycles and enemy casualties are estimated at—'

But again Keig was hissing in my ear. Like a steam-engine.

'The guns. Can he buy them?'

'But, Peter,' I said, 'about dealing with Mylchraine's other armoured cars. We can't rely on surprising them the way we did before. What we must have now is anti-tank guns. Now look, Keig plans to get down as far as the beaches just south of Hoddick quite soon. We'll be ready for supplies from you there in four weeks from today. You've got that?'

'Yes, yes. But tell me more about this defeat you inflicted on Mr Mylchraine. You realize not a word of this came out?'

'I'm not surprised. But, listen, first I must tell you the full arrangements. We may be cut off at any time. This call's going through Lesneven, you know.'

‘Yes, but look, Michael, don’t count on anything, will you? I’ll do my best but it may take some time to get hold of anti-tank guns.’

Some of Keig’s pent-up ruthlessness simmering behind me got into my bloodstream at this.

‘Now listen here,’ I said. ‘A month from today exactly we’ll be waiting on those beaches. Every night from midnight on we’ll signal out to sea with a red torch if it’s safe to land. Get the guns, get hold of a boat and be there. And you’ll see our signal, a red light flashing the letter K in Morse. K for Keig. Got it?’

‘Yes, yes, Michael. But isn’t this all going a bit fast?’

‘No, it’s not. We need those guns. And there’s another thing. We want a wireless set too. Something we can keep in touch with you by. You could get hold of that in Dublin tomorrow.’

‘Not tomorrow. It’s Sunday.’

‘Oh. Oh, is it? I’d no idea. Well, on Monday then.’

‘Well, all right, I suppose I can manage that. But about getting your story into the papers. Will they actually believe all this—about defeating a hundred Keepers?’

‘Two hundred.’

‘Oh. Two hundred, yes. Well that’s worse. I mean, how am I going to convince them it’s all happened?’

‘You can tell my old paper you had it from me, direct,’ I said. ‘But now I want your assurance that that boat’ll be there on time. It means a lot to us.’

‘I quite see that, Michael,’ Cormode said compliantly. ‘And I’ll arrange about the wireless right away. And I’ll certainly look into the question of guns and do my best for you.’

Those were almost the last words of the conversation, since we hardly wanted to risk betraying the whole plan by

keeping the line open longer than necessary. I was irritated by them at the time as being deplorably imprecise. Later I was to realize with unpleasant force that they were anything but imprecise.

7

As soon as I had hung that old-fashioned telephone ear-piece back on its hook Keig and I set out on a last round of inspection, a thing which had become almost a fixed habit with him. On this occasion, however, before leaving he stood for a moment looking at the recumbent form of young Alan Duckan, who had continued to sleep peacefully through the whole of our momentous getting into touch with the outside world again. I was used to a certain paternal solicitude that Keig often showed for the boy and stood waiting till he had satisfied himself that the lad's slumbers were untroubled.

But Keig, instead of turning away after a few moments, suddenly took up his long axe and gave the boy a gentle poke in the ribs. I almost protested out loud.

The lad woke at once. Keig looked down at him.

'D'you want to come for a walk, lad?' he said. 'We're just going out to make sure everything's all right.'

Young Alan was on his feet in a moment. He was after all a boy still and here was a treat, going out like the grown-ups.

We left Francis Crowe in the bar to keep an eye on things and off we all went, myself just a little puzzled as to why the boy was there.

Keig did nothing to enlighten me. The three of us went the rounds of the various sentries posted here and there in the little sleepy town with hardly a word spoken. But when

we had seen that nothing was amiss Keig did something else a little unexpected. Instead of marching back to the hotel and getting down to some work until the arrival of the midnight courier as had been his custom, he took an abrupt turning off our route back and led the pair of us away in the direction of the low-roofed church which, surrounded by its graveyard, presided over the northern end of the little town. And no sooner had he led us off on this unexplained detour than he began to talk.

‘Do you know what we did while you were asleep, Alan lad?’ he said.

‘No, Mr Keig.’

‘We talked on the telephone to a fine gentleman in Dublin. We told him we were still here in the world, lad. And what’s more we made him a bit of a request.’

Alan looked at Keig in the dusk of the silent street approaching the squat little church. He was plainly quite uncertain what to make of all this.

‘Yes, it’s true, lad,’ Keig said.

‘Quite true,’ I added. ‘And a very good night’s work.’

Alan looked over at Keig, marching along and lightly swinging his axe.

‘What was the request you made then, Mr Keig?’ he asked.

‘A request for guns, lad. Guns that’ll knock Mylchraine’s scout-cars to pieces, just like that.’

I almost at that point put in a rider about Cormode’s hesitancy over getting the guns. Perhaps I would have done if Alan had not been there, but I had a slight unaccounted for objection to discussing business in front of a boy. And besides Keig seemed so uncharacteristically elated that I did not like to appear to be putting a damper on him.

We strode into the churchyard, and as we did so I realized what the whole business was about. We were going to be treated to another of those displays of virtuoso axemanship that were Keig's way, his sole way, of expressing feelings of triumph.

It would have been a curious sight if there had been anybody near that deserted churchyard in the last of the summer evening to see it. Myself and the boy stock-still just inside the lychgate and perfectly silent, and Keig half way down the broad path to the church door, standing there with his feet firmly planted a little apart and sending that axe up into the evening air, up time and again, catching it and whirling it and sending it higher and higher and all without a single sound. But there was no one to see. The citizens of Carnack were all at home, if not in bed, and the whole extraordinary display was conducted in conditions of simple secrecy.

And even young Alan sensed, when at last Keig stopped, that this was something which could not be commented on. In silence the three of us strode back to the hotel and let ourselves in.

If I had improved on our success a little for Cormode's benefit, it turned out that I was anticipating events by only a matter of hours. Next day one of our patrols briefly entered the small village of Hoddick which lies at the extreme northern end of the beaches which stretch down towards Lesneven, and soon we even moved into the place ourselves. From the low hills above we were able to look at Lesneven closely through the couple of pairs of field-glasses we had succeeded in picking up. So we were near the capital indeed. But it was also evident from our observations that we could not expect to get into it unless we had the means of dealing with the scout-cars that prowled between us and its streets.

Nor could we easily get further down south. The country inland from Lesneven was as well patrolled as the area immediately in front of us, at least so far as concerned the wolds, which stretch here some fifteen miles westwards only before meeting the mountains that run all the way along the length of the island on the west Atlantic-facing shore. And if the mountain terrain defeated the scout-cars, it was not a lot kinder to us. Attempting to push farther south that way with more than a handful of men would have required an effort in surmounting the formidable natural obstacles on our path for which we were as yet by no means strong enough.

However we were left in control of the whole northern part of the island, rather more than a quarter of Mylchraine's territory. Not that, in fact, there was very much control about it, except that no Keepers paraded their feather-cockaded hats within the area. I suppose no one there at that time paid any taxes, but otherwise the people went on much as they had always done.

And Mylchraine's rule, we found to our chagrin, had not been thought of everywhere as an unmixed curse. It had brought to the country the twin excitements, and twin underminers, of whiskey and witchcraft.

Whiskey, we discovered as we got to know more of our new domain, had become in a matter of a few years every bit as much of a necessity to the people as tobacco. I pieced together at various times how this had happened. It was not a pretty story. But I really believe that Mylchraine had sat there and concocted a vast scheme to gain himself very real, if intangible, power through control of the island's hard-liquor supply, first making it dirt-cheap and, incidentally bringing about a large increase in crimes ranging from hooliganism to rape, and then some time in the year or two before our landing putting the price sharply up again. But by this time the weakness had taken hold.

However much the stuff cost there were hundreds, even thousands, of people in the island now—both in Lesneven and throughout the countryside—who were not going to go without their one night of blissful drunkenness a week.

The full extent of the whole scheme I discovered only by dribs and drabs over a long period of time. But I was confronted with the results of his other method of sapping the people of the island in a more dramatic fashion.

It was on the first of August, a date I was soon to have cause to remember, and getting on towards midnight. With Keig I had been making the rounds of our headquarters sentries at Hoddick. They were positioned some distance from the tiny village itself surrounding the single row of empty terraced ‘villas’ that we had taken over, a dozen narrow-fronted houses put up for the benefit of holiday-makers by a builder whose enterprise had extended only to coming this far out of Lesneven and there copying what he had been building in the town itself.

Keig and I were walking back through the sticky darkness of a thundery midge-whining night when a chance puff of breeze, rising and dying at once, brought a curious sound to our ears.

We stopped and listened. After a while we caught the sound again—it might have been the low moaning of chained dogs only it was interspersed with a long-drawn cackling that could not have come from any cock or hen alive—and were able to decide that it was coming from the direction of the village. We set off towards it.

‘I think it’s from the church,’ I whispered when we had got near enough to be able to hear the noise all the time.

The village church was hardly more than a big hut without tower or spire. Keig and I approached it. At the gate in the low wall surrounding the churchyard we saw that there were

lights inside, though it looked as though sacks had been hung across the windows. The noise was now quite loud.

‘What sort of a randybooze is going on here?’ Keig said sharply.

He strode up the straight path which led to the ecclesiastically shaped double-doors of the church, grasped the wrought-iron handle, jerked it round and shoved. The two doors flew apart.

An exceedingly curious sight met our eyes. The church was smokily lit by torches, flaring lengths of rough-hewn wood, a few stuck here and there on the walls and others carried by some of the thirty-odd people there. These were for the most part hopping and capering up and down the wide aisle making the noise we had heard, part moaning, part cackling. All of them were stark naked—men and women, young and old—and most of them had heavy weals running across their backs.

At the far end of the building, up on the low dais where there stood the small slab of the plain altar covered with a dark green cloth, a singular ceremony was taking place. A short file of worshippers stood jigging up and down on the broad steps, all plainly in a state of violent sexual excitement. And there bent over on the altar itself, receiving worship, was a white-buttocked prostrated figure. In front of him a young man knelt at the moment about to embrace him in a kiss.

The notorious Kiss of Shame. It might have been a scene of the wildest most degenerate romance. Except that the Participants were anything but romantic figures. I knew them, almost every one. They were the villagers with whom I had occasionally passed the time of day since we had come to Hoddick, guarded, solid, respectable folk, most of them fat, few of them young. Especially I recognized, even

down the whole length of the building, the central figure of the ceremony, the master of this esbat.

It was the village grocer. He was a man of about fifty, a tubby shiny-skinned individual, who was accustomed to part his hair very precisely in the middle and smooth it well down to either side. And he always wore spectacles too, a big round-rimmed owlsh pair. They were there now—I caught a glitter from them against the plain cloth of the altar, carefully put in place before the obscenities had begun.

Somehow they gave a final touch of the comic to the whole affair. Only, one realized after the first surprise had worn off, it was not in fact a comic business at all. It was simply pathetic.

But, while I had been staring and assessing, Keig had taken in the scene and now acted.

‘Get out,’ he roared. ‘Get out the lot of you.’

He took a few steps further into the little church where every eye had fastened on him. The wildly waving torches faltered and dropped. The worshippers within easy distance of the doors made a scuttling rush for them, dodging and ducking low as if to escape being seen. At the altar the young man who had been about to give the Kiss of Shame swirled round on all fours and scampered helter-skelter sideways down the low steps. The grocer himself stood up and turned round. He put his round plastered-down head forwards and peered at us uncertainly. I suppose he must have needed those spectacles of his to see more than a few feet because he groped behind him for them on the plain surface of the green altar-cloth, found them, put them carefully on his big fleshy nose and then uttered a single, very loud ‘Ah’ before clenching fists together and bounding straight down the broad centre aisle and out of the open doors.

The last few Participants in the celebration hurried out after him. Keig and I followed, and before I turned to pull the big doors closed after us I saw the heavy night full of flat white bodies disappearing into the darkness.

I suppose that at some time most of them must have daringly gone back and gathered up the clothes they had discarded in the church, but all I know is that when we met any of them again next day they were fully dressed and in their usual apparel. Because meet them we did: the village was too small for them to avoid us. When I went to buy food in the village store it was the tubby shiny-skinned grocer who served me himself, bowing a little and rubbing his hands together hard. I thought after a bit that he was not going to make the least reference to the events of the night before. But just as I finished he turned slightly away and directed a half-bold half-oleaginous statement into the nearest corner.

‘It was Lammas last night.’

Just that. At first I failed to understand. Then bit by bit I pieced it together. Lammas, the ancient feast day. I recalled vaguely that it came from the words ‘Loaf Mass’ and was the celebration of the start of the harvest. August the first was the day, I looked it up later. I suppose the grocer’s single obsequiously stated phrase had been intended as a comprehensive excuse. No doubt Lammas was one of the occasions when people in Mylchraine’s Oceana expected to have one of their little orgies, and the villagers here had not been willing to forgo the new customary night of pleasure just because the Keepers were no longer about.

I found, thinking over the whole episode in such spare moments as I got, that I was in two minds about it all. My first reaction had been much the same as Keig’s: here was something wrong and it had to be stopped. But now I began to ask myself how wrong it really was. It was a weakening

factor in the life of the village, certainly. People obsessed with that sort of business—and it is a sort that quickly converts interest into obsession—would not have very much time for anything else, especially not for the somewhat dull processes of a democratic life. Yet hadn't each one of them after all the right to lead their own life? And I had seen no signs whatever of coercion in the church the night before.

I began to wonder about the way Keig had marched into that meeting and laid down the law. Wasn't it pretty high-handed when you came to look at it? Who was he to say no one had a right to a little unusual sexual indulgence if they could square it with their own conscience?

I was thinking such thoughts, moodily tramping along beside Keig as we made the last rounds of the sentries, when to my surprise he voluntarily harked back to the incident.

'It's more than I bargained for, all that last night,' he said abruptly. 'Did you know that they'd keep on with it?'

The simple note of inquiry in his voice took me back to the Keig I had first known, the one who had asked me in his innocence for information on a variety of subjects I was quite unfitted to tell him about.

I gave myself time to think before replying now. The weather had broken and it was a familiar rain-soft Oceanan cloaky night. We stood there quietly getting wet.

'I suppose it was to be expected,' I answered in the end. 'Give people a taste for that sort of thing, and they get addicted. That grocer fellow is probably drunk with the sense of power he got from it all.'

'Yes,' said Keig.

He stared at the ground at his feet.

'When we have toppled Mylchraine,' he said at last, 'there'll be a lot more to be done, though I'm damned if I

can see how to set about it now.'

I had no contribution to offer. I have never been much of a one for sticking my nose into other people's lives.

Beside me Keig straightened his barrel frame.

'Well, time enough for that when it comes,' he said. 'Anyhow there's no trouble knowing what we've got to do right now.'

He strode off towards the first sentry's post. Tagging along beside him, I thought how different things were for someone like him. To me the thought that even with Mylchraine's authority gone people were still going to be happy to wallow in the sloughs he had made for them was something that cast a twisted shadow over the whole of our enterprise. Questions, until tonight submerged under the swift flow of immediate events, loomed suddenly up like black and menacing rocks. Whom were we fighting for? How much right did we have to save people from something they had got into with their eyes more or less open?

But to Keig things were not like this. To him it was utterly plain Mylchraine was evil and must be 'toppled'. And the nearer he came to achieving this, I thought, the more certain he seemed that there was only one right way: his way.

I shivered.

But a couple of minutes later we came to the first sentry and at once when Keig began his usual abrupt and pointed questioning of the man I forgot all the doubts that had sprung up. This was what we had to do: be strong. Be strong and fight as absolutely well as we could. There was no more to it than that under the protection of that sturdy figure.

A fortnight later, after days of impotently watching Mylchraine's scout-cars, on the very first night that we

flashed the Morse letter K out into the night with a red-shaded torch from the beach at Hoddick, Cormode's boat arrived.

The whole business went like clockwork. Just before midnight Keig and I assembled with a working party of eight men at the edge of the last field before the beaches began. Little Francis Crowe held a sheet of bunched red wrapping-paper in front of the most powerful electric torch we had been able to lay our hands on and, pushing assiduously at the tiny switch, flicked out the dash-dot-dash of the letter, which Keig, who it turned out had learnt Morse as part of his long self-preparation in Dublin, had taught him. And after less than ten minutes an answering light appeared suddenly out in the darkness at sea, flicking back at us briefly the same repetition of flashes.

'Keep signalling, show 'em where we are,' Keig grunted to Crowe.

We all peered into the dark until at last we were able to make out the blacker bulk of a small sea-going motor-boat. It was being rowed towards us now, very quietly, and before long the sound of the oars splashing gently in the calm sea floated to our ears. We hurried down to the water's edge across the soft sand, Crowe still dutifully signalling as he trotted along with us.

When the boat was within ten or fifteen yards of the thin white line of foam at the edge of the sand Keig abruptly began wading out to meet her. I followed, cursing myself for not having got hold of some boots.

At the side of the boat Keig wasted no time on eloquence.

'How did it go?' he muttered to the four men at the oars, peering at them to see if he knew them.

They were strangers to us, though I guessed they must be Oceanan from their voices as they told us in excited

murmurs about their adventures on the way across. In fact they had had no adventures, slinking in as Keig had planned on the night of our telephone call to Cormode at the extreme range of the infamous Kernel searchlight and encountering no difficulties at all.

Keig cut into their story before we had even hauled them as far as the sand.

‘What’ve you got?’ he said.

‘Got?’ asked the man nearest him.

‘Yes. What weapons?’

There was a moment’s silence.

‘What guns, man?’ Keig demanded.

There aren’t any guns,’ another of the oarsmen said. ‘We never heard anything about guns. It’s a radio transmitter only we were to bring.’

We all stopped and stood still, with the boat tipping gently from side to side between us in a few inches of water. For all the others this must have come as a complete shock, and, though I had half-suspected something of the sort might prove to be the case, even to me hearing my fears confirmed brought a thud of heavy disappointment.

It was Keig who eventually spoke.

‘Get that wireless up to the house,’ he said. ‘I want to talk to Cormode.’

8

Keig's anger at this setback—which I now wished I had prepared him for by mentioning the uneasiness I had felt after hearing Cormode's veiled answers to our request on the telephone a month earlier—became more and more understandable in the weeks that followed the arrival of the almost empty boat. Whereas before we had not been too much put out by our lack of ability to deal with Mylchraine's scout-cars, now as August became September and September grew towards October we found this powerlessness bitterly frustrating. With our continuing failure to hit the Keepers, each day brought in fewer recruits. Here was the simple measure of what Cormode had done to us.

Keig, I think, had seen himself as giving a fine old slanging to Cormode over the air. But the reality was very different. To begin with, the transmitter could send only Morse. Francis Crowe painfully learnt the whole code now as Keig had begun to use Jack Ascough, our proper signaller, as a leader for various small enterprises that we had in hand. But there was also another barrier between Keig and Cormode, and an even more effective one than Morse. All the incoming messages laboriously taken down one block capital after another began invariably in the same infuriatingly impersonal way: 'The Revolutionary Council . . .' A mighty shield.

So it did not take me long to be certain that Cormode, for devious reasons of his own, had decided not to let us have the guns. Curiously, it took Keig much longer to come to the

same conclusion. That anyone could contemplate not sending the weapons that would hit Mylchraine where he was strongest was inconceivable to him. And for several weeks he went on poring over the 'Revolutionary Council' messages trying to see what strength there was to each of the varied reasons they produced for not complying with his blunt and repeated requests.

Then one day he saw through it all.

Quite suddenly he looked up at me from the message which he had been studying, sitting on the floor of one of the bare rooms in our 'villa' with his broad shoulders square up against the wall.

'It's Cormode,' he said. 'That man's made up his mind we're to have no guns. He hasn't even the guts to fight Mylchraine through other people.'

It was a condemnation. No judge ritualistically putting on the black cap could have made it plainer.

And from then on we ceased totally to reply to any long-winded message about the guns—a decision which caused me a certain amount of private amusement as I contemplated Cormode's bafflement at the other end.

At the time I was simply rather tickled over this and still furious with Cormode. But later I began to see at least half the reason for the man's evasiveness. And that was simply that he could not believe what we had told him about our successes. He was never able to bring himself entirely to discount Mylchraine's steady assertions, in response to the stories in the papers, that there was no trouble of any sort in the island beyond the sporadic activities of a few hill bandits.

After Keig had uttered that flat condemnation of Cormode he relapsed into his habitual silence, the last discarded 'Revolutionary Council' message lying beside him on the

bare boards of the empty room. He sat there for, I suppose, a quarter of an hour. Then he looked up at me again.

‘Is Quiddie anywhere about?’ he said.

‘He’s somewhere,’ I replied. ‘He was trying to get that old lorry to go when I saw him last.’

‘Fetch him, would you? There’s something he can tell me.’

Duly I went and found tubby cheerful Fred where he was ambitiously trying his considerable mechanic’s skill on an abandoned lorry with the intention of providing us with some transport. And as soon as he came into the empty echoing room beside me Keig put his question.

‘Quiddie, is there any way we could shoot Molotov cocktails into those cars from a fair distance off?’

And it turned out that there was a way. The solution was not arrived at there and then by any means, but after a fortnight of trial and error Fred, unrelentingly urged on by Keig, produced a device which could send a Molotov cocktail soaring through the air on to a marked-out target the size of a scout-car. It was simple enough. It used a shotgun as its basis and fired its Molotov cocktail from this on one end of a short straight rod, on the other end of which a cartridge had been jammed. The gun was fired upside down with the top of its barrel supported on two crude homemade legs, forming altogether a moderately stable tripod.

‘Blast it,’ Fred said heedlessly when the last experiment worked, ‘that’ll fry ’em up in those old scout-cars of theirs. Fry ’em up a treat, it will.’

It did not ‘fry up’ anyone, but it did work the very first time it was used. It set a car on fire and so frightened the Keepers in it that they came running towards us with their hands up begging to surrender. In this they were, incidentally, disappointed, since Keig had given orders that we were not to encumber ourselves with prisoners but to let

anyone we captured go—another instance of his freedom from the conventional approach.

Our small victory here provided us also with an opportunity we had long been waiting for, the chance to slip a group of ten men through the prowling wall of scout-cars and into the soft untouched country south of Lesneven.

Jack Ascough, who had led the group, brought us excellent news after he had guided them at night back through the Keepers' defences. Mylchraine's panic decision after our crippling attack on the camping column to elevate his campaign against Keig into a full war had resulted in even sharper depredations than before on the people in the countryside. They had been expected to billet groups of Keepers, and the Keepers had in turn expected the best of everything to eat and drink, complete subservience from the men and, as often as not, the freedom of the women. Resentment was smouldering now like the sprawled embers under a heap of peat. One kick, scattering a corner and bringing to the red glow beneath a touch of cold air, would start a fire indeed.

We learnt, too, of the dozens of tempting targets for offensive action that were to be seen scattered all about the unprotected south, long dumps of ammunition piled up only yards from the roads, stored cans of petrol just asking to be fired, Keepers in training leaving piled weapons under the guard of just a single sentry.

Jack Ascough's eyes took on a positively hurt look in his sandy face as he told us this.

'What those Keepers need,' he said, 'is a little military discipline. I'd like to get at 'em for just a week.'

'I'd like to get at 'em for just five minutes,' Keig replied, with the heavy humour that he rose to more and more often now.

And in the last part of that September—a period of wonderful weather as it often is then with long days of unbroken goldeny sunshine extending right up to the beginning of October—it looked as if we could indeed ‘get at ‘em’ very soon.

That we were not to do so we discovered just two days before that long spell of calm sun-endowed autumn weather eventually broke up. It broke up two days late.

We were on the point of taking the decisive step forward which our new weapon had made possible and Jack Ascough’s foray into the soft south had made look so promising, repeating that operation but on a much larger scale by ambushing every scout-car out on patrol at the same time and pushing a considerable force through the gap this would make.

The scheme had presented problems. Mylchraine had his spies as we had ours, though we certainly had more and better ones. So getting together a large number of men in one place was liable to attract unwelcome attention and bring down a swift scout-car attack, which might not only inflict heavy casualties but also cause the regular car patrols to be withdrawn and spoil our long-planned ambushes.

However we thought we had hit on a solution to this difficulty. We had chosen as a point to assemble both the striking force of fifty men and the double quantity of arms they were to take for distribution to new recruits a small shallow slate quarry long since worked out. Round its edge grew huge clumps of intertwined brambles forming a high irregular hedge blocking off the old track that led into the quarry and leaving only two or three narrow paths forced by straying animals or blackberries of past years. It formed an ideal place of concealment and for over a week before the key day we secretly built up a supply of arms there.

This raiding party too was under Jack Ascough. I was a little surprised in fact that Keig had not decided to lead it himself, but it was sensible to entrust what was essentially a diversion, though a major one, to some lieutenant. Looking back later, I saw that this was the first time he had brought himself to delegate a large enterprise of any sort to somebody else.

Ascough carried out the preliminaries of his part of the operation in true Keig style, inspecting his men in a way that reminded me forcibly of Keig's inspection of us before our first battle, giving each man a sharp scrutiny and making sure he knew exactly his part in the general scheme.

But I wondered watching him—Keig and I had arrived at the quarry in the middle of his inspection—how much he was longing to have every man smartly lined up and to march along the ranks criticizing the angle of the orangey-grey woollen caps which many of our force were now beginning to wear in open imitation of Keig.

By this time all the ambush Parties for the patrolling scout-cars were, we had heard, in position and everything seemed to be going beautifully. It was five minutes past three—fifty-five minutes before the plan was due to be put into operation.

Keig went over to talk to Ascough, and I was left with young Alan Duckan, who to my slight annoyance, had tagged along with us on this trip as on so many others. He was sitting cheerfully now on one of the stubby random pillars of stone that had been left jutting up here and there on the floor of the quarry when working had been abandoned. I thought that perhaps I ought to take the opportunity of asking him whether he had heard from his parents at the farm recently, or, my real object, of finding out by implication whether he had written to them.

But suddenly he interrupted my tentative beginnings.

‘What’s that?’ he said sharply.

‘What’s what?’ I asked, somewhat irritably.

‘A noise.’

The boy sat there, a little puzzled look on his fresh-complexioned face, his head cocked at an angle under the orangey cap that he had been one of the first to acquire.

‘What sort of noise?’ I asked again. ‘I can’t hear anything.’

‘A sort of buzzing. In the sky, I think.’

‘What do you mean? An insect or something?’

‘No, no.’

He shook his head angrily. He seemed more than perplexed. A sort of premonition flickered up inside me.

‘Some sort of motor,’ he said.

‘A scout-car?’

I turned, half ready to run up the steeply sloping side of the quarry, plunge through the bramble thickets and look out, although we should have had ample warning from our advanced guards if anything suspicious had been approaching.

‘It sounds as if it’s in the sky,’ Alan said.

‘In the sky?’

Odd as it may seem, aeroplanes were very rare objects over Oceana. Occasionally an airliner on an unusual course might pass high above the long narrow spiny island, and at one time years before there had been talk of building an aerodrome and starting a regular air service to Ireland or perhaps England, but then Mylchraine had taken power and had begun deliberately cultivating the isolation of the island and the weekly steamer had been thought contact enough with the rest of the decadent world.

Now Alan was staring hard into the clear sky and I automatically turned to stare with him. As I did so I too heard the sound. It was a tiny regular droning. And, of course, I knew at once that it came from the engine of an aeroplane.

And nor was it the sound of a distant high whining airliner. It was the buzz, less familiar to Oceanan ears, of a petrol-engined light aircraft.

I ran over to Keig. But he had heard the sound before I reached him.

‘It’s maybe Mylchraine’s,’ he said. ‘Get under cover, you men.’

But this was an order difficult to obey. There was precious little cover in the quarry. All that grew on that dark bluish stone floor were a few tufts of grass. At the edge of the quarry, true, here and there the brambles tumbled down the steeply sloping sides, and as many men as could ran and huddled in their faint shadows. But the majority of us were caught in the open. There were few places where it was possible to get up out of the quarry at all, and at most of these it was only by scrambling on all fours. Some of the men began attempting this, but I thought the dust they scuffled up and their frantic movements were more likely to be spotted from above than if they were to stand stock-still.

As yet we had none of us seen the plane. In the sharp-sided basin of the quarry it was bound to be out of our line of vision until it was almost on top of us. But we had all heard it, and there could be no doubting what it was now. A light aircraft of some sort was steadily droning its way at a low height across the countryside. And as far as we could tell it was, in fact, making more or less directly for our hiding place.

‘Keep still,’ Keig roared. ‘Every man like a stone.’

It was the best order that could be given in the situation. And it was wonderfully well obeyed. Within seconds every trace of movement died out in the fifty men or so standing in that small steep-sided arena.

‘Keep your heads down,’ Keig called.

More sensible advice. At least there would be no blur of white faces for the pilot to spot as he droned above us.

And then the plane was there. I twisted my head round cautiously as the noise of its engine suddenly doubled at the point at which it came directly to us unhampered by the sides of the quarry.

I saw a light high-wing monoplane, swooping round in a low arc. It was a mere club machine, a toy.

But I realized, standing there, head lowered, nape of the neck exposed, like some penitent awaiting sentence, that for all the machine’s toy-like air it held absolute power over us. Would it be armed, I wondered. Or was it only being used to locate us? One man with a machine-gun in its cabin could practically finish the lot of us off.

The noise of the engine was abruptly cut to half-volume and we all seemed to realize simultaneously that we were out of view again. Heads were raised. Faces looked grim.

And then the pitch of the engine-note changed.

It’s banking, I thought. It’s spotted us, and it’s turning to have another look. Or to open fire.

‘Heads down,’ Keig called.

He did not need to use a Particularly loud voice. In the tense silence in the quarry a whisper almost would have been heard.

‘Heads down. He’s maybe not sure of us. If we don’t move, we’ll fool him yet.’

He sounded masterfully calm. But I knew that, with his gift of swiftly seeing the consequences of things, he must have already been sure his fight against Mylchraine had taken an appalling turn for the worse.

Now came the jump in engine volume that meant we were in direct line of vision once more.

And then the answer to my question: would it be armed? It was. And more thoroughly, more terribly, than I had ever guessed. There was a sudden flash of light from somewhere just inside the edge of the quarry, immediately followed by a wild roar of sound.

I stood with my eyes riveted to the spot it had come from.

A wide splash of flame was leaping high from the wall and floor of the quarry. Dark, greasy, devouring flame, which turned suddenly into heavy black smoke. By all that was lucky no one had been very near that Particular patch of ground or they would have been enveloped at once in the foul stuff. One or two of the men nearest it were already beating at small blazing patches on their clothing and low flames were biting into the brambles on the quarry lip.

And now I knew what it was, though I had never seen it before. It was napalm.

Above us in the sky the plane had gone out of sight. But again I heard that change in engine-note which meant it was banking steeply round to come in for another run.

‘Out. Out of the quarry. Out.’

Keig was yelling like a maniac. And he had need to. The men were gripped by fear. Some of them were shouting, others cursing, some even whimpering.

In a moment Keig’s yell sent them tearing at the sides of the quarry to get at least into the open where they could run and feel they had some semblance of control over their own destinies. Those few nearest the places where an

ascent was at all possible were making some progress, but so many men were attempting to get out at the same time that they were pulling each other down. At other points men were trying desperately to climb the sheer quarry sides, but to do that except with the utmost care and patience was a simple impossibility. And no one dared be patient or careful now, with the engine-note of the little bombing plane getting louder and louder at every instant.

A few yards away I saw Jack Ascough scrambling up on to one of the round stubby pillars of unquarried rock. I had just time to wonder what on earth he was doing, and then I saw. He had a rifle with him, one of our captured Lee-Enfields, a weapon that must have been familiar to him as his own face from his army days. And he was taking a solid stance on the top of the short pillar and bringing the weapon up to fire. It was pathetic.

He stood there, an isolated figure with almost all the rest of us trying to get up the walls of the quarry all round, and he had about him something of the look of a stiffly-drawn figure in some small-arms manual. His attitude epitomized correctness: the butt of his rifle was tucked with exactitude into his shoulder, his left hand was gripping the stock firmly in the correct place, the forefinger of the right hand was curled round the trigger inside the guard ready, not to pull, but to squeeze. He was a lesson to every man he had ever drilled in his sergeant days.

And he was helpless. What harm could a single rifle bullet do to a plane that, for all the oppressiveness with which it had borne down on us, was still keeping to a prudent height above the ground?

Now it was on us again. I watched it transfixed. I could see through the front of the cabin the black helmet-encased head of the pilot, intent and unmoving. I could not see

anyone ready to loose the next consignment of napalm on us. How were they going to do it?

Through some sort of trap-door in the underside of the plane, I supposed. How did it come? I had no idea. A bomb? Was there a bomb-rack in the plane? Perhaps the pilot was the only person on board.

Then I heard the crack of Jack Ascough's rifle. But the plane flew on as if nothing had happened.

And now came the answer to my frenzied needless questions about how precisely the napalm came down. It came down in a sort of pod-like canister. I saw the black object actually leave the plane. It did indeed come from the underside, and tumbled through the air towards us.

I had time to calculate that on this occasion the bomber had aimed better. The canister was not going to strike the side of the quarry. It was going to land somewhere in the middle. And with not far short of fifty men still milling round trying to get out it was bound to do terrible damage.

I buried my head in my arms and waited, hunched and tense as if I was on the point of bursting.

The flash came and the roar. I sprang to life, ready to flap desperately with my bare hands if any spot of the malignant stuff should fall on me.

But the black canister had landed some way away. I turned to see just where.

I shall never forget the sight that met my eyes. Jack Ascough, on his flat-topped stubby rock platform, had been transformed in one instant into a pillar of flames.

They enveloped him entirely as if a tall thin cone had been dropped over his head and had gone right down to his feet. Even as I watched the dark greasy tongues of fire licked higher, and the rifle, covered with the sticky clinging stuff too, fell away in a separate blazing line of its own.

And the next moment Keig was beside the little round platform beating at the flames with both hands outstretched. But he could not endure the proximity of that heat. He dropped back curled up in pain.

For a few instants longer the thin pointed flame-cone stood there alone in triumph. Then it too slowly keeled over and crashed to the ground.

Above us the plane had banked once more and was coming in for a third run. I blundered my way over to Keig, who was on his knees with one scorched hand under each armpit, and helped him stumbling to the edge of the pit. We stood there together while the third canister landed, again in the middle of the target from which by now everyone had mercifully run clear.

And that was it. The plane did not bank again. It flew off into the afternoon sunshine, its supplies evidently exhausted. But it had done its work.

9

From the moment that that little light aircraft had droned into the sky above us things took an abrupt, almost catastrophic turn for the worse in our affairs. It was acridly ironic that Mylchraine's panic reaction to our success at the Keepers' camp should have brought this about. Had he struck back simply with his scout-cars, as we had expected, we should have had a harder time to begin with but, with either guns from Cormode or Fred Quiddie's improvised weapons, we would have fought our way back to parity before long. Now with Mylchraine equipped in this hysterically obliterating way there was no hope of that.

We had been lucky that his first air-strike against us had not been a great deal worse. I imagine that the plane must have loaded only three canisters of napalm because this was in the nature of a trial run. Later it carried more, as did the other two machines that Mylchraine had acquired. Had the first taken on its full load that day the core of Keig's forces might have been wiped out in one afternoon.

As it was our total casualties were: Ascough killed, Keig burnt on both hands, five other men suffering from burns on various Parts of their bodies. In this light my fingertip injury, already completely healed, was trifling indeed. I seldom noticed it in fact, though the small deformity is still there to this day. I can see it as I write.

But the damage done to us was not to be measured by our list of casualties. Other strikes followed fast and furious on the first. The two remaining days of fine weather when

all three aircraft could roam at will high up above us, nosing down to investigate the slightest suspicious movement, were hell for us, no less. We were reduced at once to dodging about in ones and twos, to pretending to be farm labourers again, to abandoning the small amount of headquarters equipment we had contrived to gather in our palmy days.

Indeed, with the Keepers sweeping back under their air protection into the territory they had until that day been excluded from, it was only the ending of the unremittingly fine weather that saved us all from capture. Under the cover of merciful cloaky days we were able to hurry back to the mountains where pursuit was difficult and the broken craggy rocks, narrow ravines and shallow caves gave us shelter from above and a breathing space.

Not that Keig apparently needed time for thought. The very night that our small headquarters group dropped once more thankfully down into that same glen where we had spent our first days in the island some seven months earlier, he knew what we had to do. He made it all sound simple too.

‘Mylchraine’s got the whip hand now all right,’ he said. ‘With him able to drop that ungodly stuff of his on us whenever we show our heads we’ll never get at him at all.’

Fred Quiddie was one of those listening.

‘Thanks for making it all look so dandy,’ he commented, with a hollow echo of his usual ebullience.

But Keig’s newly won, or newly self-permitted, gift for rough humour had deserted him.

‘No,’ he said. ‘What we’ve got to do is this. We’ve got to destroy that stuff and break up the planes.’

It went on from there, of course. But this was the nub of his plan. And in a remarkably short time plan had been

turned into action. The long and tenuous chain of couriers from the remoter Parts of the island had eventually brought in the piece of information Keig had at once asked for: the planes flew from a field in Mylchraine's own huge estate of Gilvinneck, a rich slice of wold occupying most of the centre of the island stretching far south. Once Keig knew where to attack he studied such maps as we had and worked out a route down to the area, if route it could be called running as it did where no roads or even tracks existed. Then he selected three of us to go down and destroy the planes and napalm with him—Fred Quiddie, doubtless because we were to use his famous anti-scout-car weapons, a man called Pat Boddough, one of our island recruits, a huge burly fellow, taken no doubt because of his sheer strength, and myself.

Why was I taken? I still find it hard to say. Because Keig wanted me. That was only the outward shell of the explanation, though certainly I was neither so tough nor so expert a fighter that I would have qualified on those grounds. But why did Keig want me? I never knew. It was not that he consulted me, and certainly not that he confided in me. But he chose me to go, and I went. Naturally.

The route we had to take was quite simply to go along the chain of mountains that runs like a spine all down the Atlantic coast of Oceana. The mere fact that the hills stand peak jammed against peak, and that at that time of year snow begins to lie on the higher slopes, did not discourage Keig a whit. A way to those killer planes and their stock of napalm lay through the mountains: we would take it.

Our route measured just sixty miles in a direct line on the map, not such a great distance. But how many miles we had to walk in fact I do not know. We were always either climbing or descending and we were seldom on the direct line of our march. If we were not snaking sideways up a slope to ease the ascent, we were having to make a long hopelessly maddening detour to get round an impassable

obstacle like the occasional sheer wall of rock or the more frequent deeply cut mountain stream often uncrossable for miles. And we were ridiculously ill-equipped to be out in the open day and night in that pretty bleak time of year. Oceana's mountains are no Himalayas, but people have died from exposure in conditions no worse than ours.

Little wonder then that the sixty miles took us five days to traverse.

But at last we did reach the edge of the wolds again. And it was as if we had stepped back from killing winter into kindly autumn. There was a smell of woodsmoke lingering in the air and under the mantle of a golden-leaved tree it felt warm.

We waited till darkness had fully come and then we cautiously pushed forward.

The scanty reports we had had from unknown sympathizers here in the southerly part of the island proved to be right: conditions were very different. There were no arrogant armoured cars, no hornet-buzzing motor-cycle patrols of Keepers.

We made our way quietly through a peaceful countryside sleeping undisturbed by wars and rumours of wars, with the first frosts beginning to bite at the soft petals of the bushy dahlias in the cottage gardens that we stole past. There was no sign here of any of the upheavals of the north. Everybody was obviously going about their quiet lives in their usual way. Even the signposts, always rooted up in the north, were in place here pointing with age-honoured fingers the way they had always pointed.

It was as if they were showing us where to go. With their aid, instead of having to spend a whole dangerous day finding the exact place we had been told Mylchraine kept the planes, as we had expected to do, we walked to it almost directly in two hours.

Nor did we have any Particular difficulties when we arrived. Standing up against the night sky, we spotted at once a tall spinney of elms, their leaves half gone. We made our way towards it up a little rounded hillock and found it deserted. In half an hour we had buried ourselves comfortably in fallen leaves and were lying where we knew that with the coming of day we would have a view over the whole stretch of flat land some part of which Mylchraine used as a landing strip. The night sped by.

And then the sun began to come up at last and we saw below us a shallow blanket of mist clinging to the flat wide-spreading ground. But already looming out above this mist only some quarter of a mile away we could see the stark black shape of a big barn.

‘Bet that’s their hangar,’ Fred Quiddie murmured. ‘These old Molotovs’ll do a lovely job in there when we creep near enough.’

He patted affectionately the knapsack beside him with its clinking oil-filled bottles.

‘Think of the napalm,’ I said. ‘When we set that alight it’ll send up a column of smoke they’ll see half way to Lesneven.’

We felt a little breeze stir in our faces, and, like wrappings being gently removed from some precious object, the thin layer of mist began to stream away. And that was when we saw them: first the pill-boxes and then the coils of barbed wire.

There were four pill-boxes, made out of sandbags, low and hugging the ground, each about a hundred yards clear of the hangar, and the wire ran in fat rolls all round in front of them. As the light improved we were able to see that inside each pill-box there was mounted a light machine-gun, which, to judge by the way their glinting blue-steel barrels prowled constantly over the landscape in front of them,

were manned by men ready at any instant to deal with trouble. And, as a last twist of irony, when the mist had fully blown away we saw stacked beside the big hangar, the final confirmation that we had found our target, a stack of the long black canisters of napalm.

All day Keig watched the pill-boxes, scarcely speaking a word.

There was a stir below about ten in the morning when one of the planes was wheeled out of the hangar and through a crude gate in the barbed wire. Its engine was already going and soon it was loaded with its supply of napalm and taxied down one leg of a giant cross of close-mown grass in the big field by the barn.

‘Blast it,’ muttered Fred, as it took to the air. There goes trouble for someone.’

‘There’s two hundred yards of mown grass between where it runs and the nearest cover,’ Keig said flatly.

And then he fell back into silence.

He said nothing when about two hours later the plane returned and was got into the guarded hangar as invulnerably as it had been got out. And he made no other comment when in the afternoon the same procedure was repeated.

But an hour before dusk he summoned us nearer him with a crook of his finger.

Stiff, hungry, worried, we crept on our bellies to within whisper range.

‘With only the four of us and the weapons we’ve got,’ Keig said, ‘those planes are as safe as houses. We’re going back tonight.’

I felt a sharp thump of disappointment. Though I had not been able to see for the life of me how we were to do it, it

had never at all occurred to me that we would not leave those canisters of napalm burning fiercely before we had done.

Pat Boddaugh, burly and hasty, felt a good deal more.

‘That’s bloody ridiculous,’ he burst out, hardly bothering to keep his voice down. ‘We can’t just let those planes of his sit there. Not after all we’ve been through.’

He glared over at the distant hangar and the dark yellowy sandbagged posts. His mouth was set, his eyes were blazing. He looked as if at any instant he would be up and thundering down towards the target.

‘We’ll be off in three hours from now,’ Keig said. ‘We’ll have to let the farm dogs quieten first.’

He said nothing more. And he never did offer any explanation of this willingness, totally unprepared for by anything I had seen of him yet, to back right out.

It was only long afterwards, long after we had made the hellish journey back to our familiar glen hideout, that the explanation that he had not felt obliged to offer floated already formed into my mind.

Keig, as I saw then, though more sheerly determined than any man I had ever met—or have met yet—coupled this willpower with as strong a strain of practicality. With the single exception perhaps of his sudden attachment to young Alan Duckan, the son he might have had, he was never any sort of romantic. Certainly he was never one of those who seek to bring about the impossible by a magical act of will and die in the attempt as often as not. He had seen Mylchraine as needing to be toppled, he had looked at what would have to be done to bring this about and it had not seemed to him beyond human powers. So he had soberly set about the task. Faced, however, with a set of facts that

really could not be dealt with, as here, he had quietly and calmly accepted their logic. It was his greatest strength.

The snow came two days after we had got back, sick and sore, to the glen. The wind shifted to the north and at once there came hard drumming showers of tiny sharp flakes which nevertheless lay from the start on the already hard-frosted ground. Before that night was over the whole mountainside was transformed under a solid layer of it, and soon we realized that it would bring worse problems than merely warding off a colder chill in our shallow cave sleeping-places. It made the business of getting food ten times more difficult. No longer were the rabbits easy to snare and other game retreated into Parts of the mountains even more inaccessible than our hide-out. And, wherever we went now, we left clear tracks. So expeditions down to friendly shepherds' houses and to the hamlets on the edge of the wolds below where we bought provisions became infinitely more dangerous than they had been.

Within days we were on minimal rations and had begun to be gnawed at by hunger. It was an odd sensation at first. I suppose I had never really been prolongedly hungry before in my life, but now I went about all day with a little nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach as if I was soon going to be ill. For months it never left me, and, unlike the pain of a crooked knee or a touch of rheumatism, this did not seem to be something one could get to tolerate and even in a way like.

We had to limit ourselves to occasional expeditions only to the wolds bringing back each time as many supplies as we could and going to tedious lengths especially as we neared the glen to make all our tracks in places where they could not be followed and, above all, could not be seen from the air. Because as often as the weather allowed—and the frequent snowstorms of that early winter were both a

blessing and a curse—Mylchraine's three aircraft prowled above the mountains and never hesitated when they saw something suspicious to run steadily in and slowly tip out one of those clumsy black fire-spewing canisters. Here and there all over the mountains for miles around us their scars showed as ugly patches of burnt-out gorse or heather until the snow mercifully blotted them out again.

So we spent hours, literally, tramping the long way round to avoid putting a telltale line of footprints across a virgin expanse of snow, and the fires that we longed for had to be kept as small as possible and used only for cooking, with a sack of earth always ready beside them to put them out instantly if the lookouts at the head of the glen heard the faintest drone of one of Mylchraine's aircraft. On days that were at all still the whole time a fire was lit someone sat next to it and kept wafting away the smoke as it formed, since nothing would have given away our location more quickly than a long rising column of smoke and the safety of the glen was the only ace we had left.

Needless to say, such constant watchfulness over irksome details of this sort when we were already miserable enough produced its backlash of grumbling. We did what Keig ordered, because none of us for a moment considered the possibility of disobeying, but we disliked what we had to do.

And then one day one of us failed to obey. The first we knew about it was when just after it had got fully daylight one of the sentries called down from the top of the glen 'Aeroplane.' At once we all crowded to the entrances of our sleeping caves and looked to see whether any telltale objects had been left out of cover. But there was nothing that was not safely under the snow-covered frameworks we had built and we had had no fire since the evening before. So we sat where we were and listened to the tiny pricking drone of the aircraft drilling its way across the sky.

It grew louder, and someone murmured half-interestedly 'He's coming close today.'

Then we heard the plane banking and a moment later the drone became full-throated. For all the chill air around me I felt a sudden sweat break out over my whole body as I remembered Jack Ascough: the aircraft's engine-noise was coming at us in just the way it had done the day he had been burnt like a torch.

And then it happened. We had one long glimpse of the machine, flying directly down the length of the glen though high above us. We saw the hatch open on its underside and two black canisters roll out in quick succession. I suppose we jerked ourselves back a little deeper into the caves: there was nothing more we could do in the time. And then, one, two, the canisters landed right in the glen and smoky dollops of flame were flung in all directions.

No one was harmed, thanks to the protection of the caves. But it was obvious that somehow our hiding place had been spotted. We crouched there waiting for the plane to bank, turn and run in again while the thick greasy flames took hold of the fir-branches of our daytime shelters. But the aircraft engine-note tailed rapidly away and soon was lost.

At once Keig ordered us to collect up every scrap of our possessions that we could get at through the fires.

'Quine and Quiddie, the transmitter, Boddaugh, take the generator. You, Alan, lad, I want you to take my papers. Look after 'em. We're away in ten minutes.'

And in ten minutes—pockets hastily stuffed, bundles of bedding quickly caught up, guns shouldered, we were off, loping along at intervals of a couple of yards or so, heading away from our pinpointed hiding-place before a force of Keepers came to follow up the air strike.

It was when we had stumbled only some two hundred yards from the head of the glen and had just come out on to the open hillside that we saw how it had been that the pilot had known where to drop those canisters. On a wide open slope of snow below us a single track of footprints ran, pointing like a line drawn on a map to the very heart of our hiding-place.

We stood in the cover of a scatter of scree and straggly gorse-bushes and looked at it.

Keig's face was expressive now, expressive as I had never quite thought to see it. And paradoxically what it expressed was lack of expression, a positive stony lack of expression. The mouth was being kept a little too straight, the eyes were held in a hardness that was fractionally more than their accustomed set look in repose.

We all knew why.

Only one of us had been away from the glen the night before. Young Alan, sent specially by Keig to a near-by sympathizer with a message that I for one would have liked to have seen entrusted to a fully-grown man.

Keig crunched now past me along the scatter of scree towards the boy.

'It was you, lad, wasn't it?' he said.

The boy looked down at his feet. I, too, could not bring myself to look up any longer and let my gaze fall to regard the ground where the lad stood at the far end of the line of us. I noticed with a sudden Particularizing vision that the boy's boots—those 'good boots' of his that he had been so eager to put on in anticipation of Keig recruiting him that day back in the spring under the blossoming chestnut-tree beneath whose shade he had grown up—were broken and battered now and tied round with grease-smearred rags. They must have been misery to walk in.

‘Well?’ Keig demanded, his voice harsh and dry.

‘I was so tired coming back last night, Mr Keig,’ Alan muttered, with tears not far below the surface. ‘I thought it was bound to snow again before morning. And it didn’t.’

‘Give me that bag of papers,’ Keig said.

I watched the boy duck his head a little and slip out of the strap of the leather satchel in which Keig kept our handful of headquarters ‘documentation’. He held the satchel out to Keig, who took it without a word.

For a moment afterwards the two of them stood looking at each other. Then Keig spoke again.

‘Make your way home,’ he said. ‘Travel by day and keep well away from the Keepers.’

I could almost feel him stopping himself adding a single word more.

‘Yes, Mr Keig,’ Alan whispered.

He stood where he was for a few seconds, as if he thought there must be something else to do. But there was nothing. He half-turned and set off along the slippery line of scree passing—there was no other way round—right in front of us all.

And it was when he had got almost to the end of the line just by where Fred Quiddie and I were standing shouldering the heavy transmitter on its long pole that Keig called out something more.

‘Lad.’

Alan turned. He succeeded in keeping his face unmoving, but there had been too much alacrity in the way he had swung round.

‘That cap, lad,’ Keig said. ‘Take it off. There’s too many Keepers know we wear ‘em now.’

Slowly the boy reached up and pulled off his orangey-red cap, the cap that was an exact replica of the one Keig always wore, the one knitted for him long ago by pale-faced, ill, devoted Margaret in Dublin. Alan looked now at the bundle of orangey wool in his hand, wondering what to do with it. For a second he seemed half-determined to throw it defiantly to the ground. But he had already left one clue too many to our whereabouts.

An almost hunted expression appeared on his broad open face. And then he leant swiftly across, thrust the bundle of wool into my hand and was off at a run down the mountainside in and out of the straggly gorse bushes.

We never saw him again.

In a way it seemed in the weeks that followed that Keig was paying more than the simple rational consequences of his act of sentiment over the boy. We never rested in all that time, hurrying from one group to another of the remaining men we had recruited in the high summer of the wolds and who now lay at various points in the mountains in this bitter winter. It was seldom that we made our headquarters anywhere for three whole nights together and sometimes, when we learnt the Keepers were on our trail, we stayed put for a couple of hours only.

Yet in spite of everything Keig contrived to resume his old policy of striking back whenever the Keepers hit at us. Gone however were the days when we fought them on anything like level terms. The most we could do now was to take advantage of any spell of clouded days and, safe from indiscriminate napalm attack, inflict some damage somewhere.

If this did nothing else, it stopped the cautious country-folk turning informer. And, indeed, every time we shot at a pair of motor-cycling Keepers—they never went singly

nowadays—or planted a Molotov cocktail on, or nearly on, a scout-car an almost perceptible corresponding improvement would take place in our supply of information. Our wild scramble for the mountains when Mylchraine's planes had first appeared had seriously disrupted our courier system, but now, despite the snow and the increased freedom which the Keepers had to roam about, we steadily rebuilt the system to something like its former efficiency.

Yet whatever small successes we scored from time to time we still never went other than hungry. On good days we had one solid meal, generally a sort of all-in stew—what a triumph when we caught a white-furred winter hare—a breakfast of dry biscuits and water and a supper of the same, except that we usually managed to brew up a sort of tea with it made by steeping rowan berries in hot water. On bad days we fared worse.

Christmas Day was a bad one. It came just when we had had to shift our headquarters yet again, and this time we had had to go further than usual before finding another safe place, so most of the day we spent on the move and we had no time to light a fire that night.

It was the next morning that Keig addressed us on the subject of not speaking about food.

'Listen,' he said. 'There's to be no more talk about eating. Not another word from any one of you. I heard a couple of you last night. You were driving yourselves silly making up Christmas dinners you'd have liked to have had. It's got to stop.'

The order was religiously obeyed: Keig had established such an ascendancy over those of us who were nearest him that that went without saying. But he did allow himself a series of jokes on the subject thereafter. We would get such specimens of humour creaky as a wooden toy as: 'The thing

I said that wasn't to be mentioned' or 'a little of you-know-what'. And, damn it, I laughed every time.

A subject I found much less laughable and one which Keig did not ban, because he never knew it ran rife among our headquarters group, was sex. I suppose it was an inevitable topic of conversation with a small party of us often cooped up in hiding for days at a stretch waiting for a spate of activity from the Keepers to die down. But I found it galling to say the least.

It was Fred Quiddie, naturally enough, who started it. He would begin by going *sotto voce* through his whole repertoire of dirty songs—it was immense—and then when this legitimate method of whiling away the hours was exhausted he would start retailing, to the open admiration of the less sophisticated like big Pat Boddough, dozens of his sexual experiences. An unwilling listener often to his endlessly detailed accounts of the same basic set of facts, I never doubted that, for all his unromantically tubby appearance, he was describing real events. But his stories made me darkly furious. They roused memories I should have preferred to let lie dormant.

However I was in no position to stop him. Only Keig could have done that, and he, generally establishing himself some distance away from the rest of us, never had any idea that this was going on.

There were however hours of respite for me when I would be summoned by Keig to help him over the details of some new attack he was planning. And sometimes when we had finished I would stay on. Keig seldom spoke, and I would have been surprised if he had. But I, with nothing now to distract me, would frequently in these circumstances plunge into the depths of gloom.

I could see no end to our present situation. That was what depressed me most. Of course with the coming spring life

would at least get easier. We would have enough to eat again. But while Mylchraine had those planes of his I saw no way out for us.

I used to lie there and say to myself that things could get no blacker. But in this I was wrong. About the middle of January a worse blow fell for all of us, and one that was the harder to bear for coming from a clear sky.

It happened when we made our weekly radio contact with Dublin, a routine which we painstakingly stuck to though there was little for the English or Irish papers now in what we had to tell Cormode, and such occasional cheering information as he gave us was appallingly difficult to spread in the deadened silence of Mylchraine's Oceana. However we kept this one frail link with the world open, and it was through it that the blow fell.

We received this time, not the usual almost meaningless transcript of Oceanan events in Dublin and generalized messages of encouragement, but a single piece of concrete and grim news, pieced out Morse letter by Morse letter.

'The Revolutionary Council wishes to convey to Thomas Keig its sincerest regrets at the death of Margaret, his wife. Her final illness was brief and bravely borne. All members of the Council attended the funeral at Glasnevin Cemetery on Friday last. Ends.'

10

Never after the arrival of that bald message from Dublin did I see Keig perform one of those strange axe rituals of his. Certainly there had been no occasion for triumphing recently and nor was there to be for some while to come. Yet times would come later when Keig would have had every right to rejoice, but even when they did there was never any sign he was experiencing that curious urge to silent boastful celebration that I had first seen expressing itself in the moonlight by the seashore within hours of my meeting the now dead Margaret when we had succeeded in making good our escape from the Keepers on the Kernel.

When an occasion arose for such another display of axeman-ship as I had watched only some four or five months earlier than this when Keig had led young Alan Duckan and myself to the deserted churchyard at Carnack, and when nothing happened I was at first surprised and then relieved. I saw Keig's loss of this urge as marking the conquering of a subterranean spirit of self-admiration in him, a mysterious breaking-out that I had never been able to foretell and had always feared. Later I was to look back on this optimism of mine as facile indeed.

But now when the news of Margaret's death was fresh Keig seemed to ride the blow, which we had all thought of as hitting at us too, in that if Keig were to lose that drive of his our chances of lasting out on the island would be almost non-existent. For two or three weeks certainly his creaky humour failed, but bit by bit even this came back. And never, even on the day that grim message came in squeaky

dot by squeaky dash, did he falter in his opposition to Mylchraine.

So we came to think that his oaken frame had endured this blow as it had endured so many others. It was only much later that I began wondering if in fact the blow had been infinitely more telling than any of us had ever suspected.

The trouble was that no one could ever tell with Keig. I can lay claim to knowing him better than any of the others, but I never really fathomed what went on behind those dark uncommunicative eyes. I never felt I was seeing the machinery. And that gave him, to me and to all who came in contact with him, a constant concealed unpredictability. It was not that he was changeable like some of the mountain men we had with us who were apt to swing from the extreme of despair to utter self-confidence for any reason or none. Keig was steady as a rock. And it was not only that he would sometimes come up with solutions to problems of a simplicity that positively startled. There, looking back, one felt one could see the train of thought. But it was as if there was always much more machinery in that bullet head than one ever caught a glimpse of.

I often used to think how odd it was that the times had called out the man. Had Mylchraine remained merely one of the island's powerful, almost independent, estate owners then Keig would have spent all his life farming a small patch of land on an islet so quiet and obscure that some of its inhabitants had never felt moved to go and see the sea which surrounded them everywhere at a distance of only a few miles. Keig a quiet small farmer: it was a curious notion.

All that strength would then have remained inside that head unused and unknown about. And what else might be there unused still? There was no telling. A new urgent need might bring out new facets of his mind yet. And—this was a

more terrible thought—new outward events might produce unguessable movements there under that dark brow.

This was what later was to plague me about Margaret's death. Keig had loved her. He had left her to go and fight Mylchraine. Had her death, separated from him, driven him into a more exalted loneliness than that he had come to live in since he had become our leader? Might he be gripped by the loneliness that takes men up the solitary path of power?

But at the time Keig learnt that Margaret had died there was, as I have said, little to show how deeply he had been affected. He kept us all steadily hitting back at the Keepers. And the Keepers kept hitting at us. Mylchraine was still well astraddle his island.

And one night, I remember it only too well, one of our couriers failed to keep their midnight rendezvous.

I felt at first only a sense of irritation: the girl who was due to have made this final delivery of news and information was Particularly reliable, a shepherd's daughter of about eighteen, a sturdy sensible creature, not pretty but giving off a feeling of plain wholesomeness in everything about her, her daisy-like blue eyes, the ruddiness—no euphemism possible or necessary here—of her face with its little point of a chin just breaking the complete roundness and her simple habit of standing to repeat her memorised bulletin with her feet planted apart as if she had some precious object to lift on to a high shelf.

But when it had grown to be half past midnight and there was still no sign of her my irritation at something counted on having unexpectedly gone astray changed abruptly into a cold snicker of anxiety.

It was three days before I learnt that the anxiety had been totally justified.

In the meanwhile our courier system had picked up its customary routine. We had shifted our headquarters next day and that night a different courier, a little crippled old itinerant pot-repairer, had reported at midnight exactly. When he had delivered his message we asked him whether he had heard anything about the girl—her name was Maria, Maria Joughin—but he said he had not. She came from some way off his recent route and he had heard nothing.

‘Keepers have been mortal busy round that way, though,’ he added. ‘That new Overseer’s a devil.’

I did not like it. The Keepers’ busyness was never of a very savoury sort, and we had already learnt a little about this new Overseer, a man named Lewie, who was plainly some sort of psychopath.

And then, two days later, we heard. I will just state the bare facts. The man Lewie had clamped a strict curfew on the whole area through which Maria had to go to come to us. Determined not to let us down, she had tried to get through and had been caught. Lewie had had her taken to his headquarters, a little village name Kerity, a few miles from her own home, and there in the tiny village hall he had publicly interrogated her. The interrogation had taken the form of lining up a whole row of his brawniest Keepers and, each time the girl was asked to tell what she knew of us and refused, allowing one of these fellows to rape her. The whole business did not bear thinking about, and does not bear thinking about even now.

I saw Keig’s face darken with rare anger when we heard. At once he began questioning the reconnaissance party that had brought in the news, and before long I saw the drift of his queries. He was planning to have Lewie himself kidnapped.

For more than an hour he went on at the three men who had been down to the edge of Kerity village. He did not treat

them any too kindly, thumping on the board he carried across his knees in lieu of a table in the primitive log hut we had made ourselves as a headquarters. Time and time again he banged out the same question at one or another of them to force from a tired brain some useful fact that had been noticed and forgotten.

At last he stood up and all three of the men he had been questioning dropped down almost as one and lay exhausted on the crackly double-layered brushwood floor of our crude hut.

‘What’s the weather doing?’ Keig demanded of the rest of us.

I squirmed my way out of the low narrow entrance to the hut to find out. It was cold, colder than I had ever known it on the island, as it had been for days, almost a fortnight. Even spending a few minutes outside the close fug of the hut chilled one to the marrow and to leave one’s bare hands outside one’s pockets for more than a second or two was torture.

There was not a star to be seen in the early night sky and from the feel of the wind I thought another fall of snow could not be long away. Ideal weather for our purposes, especially if the snow came at the right time to obliterate tracks.

I went gratefully back into the hut and told Keig what I had observed.

He led the raiding party himself. Any signs of willingness to let others take charge of important operations had succumbed to the dark and brooding rage that still plainly possessed him. The group of them left an hour later and they were back at two a.m.

Lewie was with them.

I woke from an uneasy sleep on the brushwood floor at the back of the hut just as he was shoved in through the

narrow doorway. It was not a pleasant specimen of humanity that I peered at through blearily sticky eyes.

He must have weighed close on twenty stone, a great gross hulk of a man. And his face was the grossest part of him, cut on almost inhumanly coarse lines like a crude caricature. He had come staggering into the low-roofed hut and now pitched forward to the floor under the impetus of the shove he had been given and unable to save himself because his arms were pinioned. I saw there was a powdering of white across his big slobbery shoulders. It must have begun to snow then.

I shivered. It seemed even more bitterly cold than before, for all that a fall of snow is meant to bring a rise in temperature.

Two of the men who had followed Lewie in pounced quickly on him and hoisted him with difficulty to his feet. They held him against one of the low roughly built side-walls. The rest of the raiding party came in, with Keig bringing up the rear. I made a rapid count. No one missing. And the prisoner collected. A success.

Keig shook the snow off his own shoulders impatiently and placed himself in front of the belly-sagging Lewie.

For a moment he looked at him in silence. And then, in a voice which was angry but never rose above an ordinary conversational tone, he recited to him in full detail just what we had discovered he had done to that poor girl.

Lewie stared down at the brushwood bundles on the floor. The snow on his boots was slowly melting and seeping away. He looked like a cornered animal—some great wild boar—who had come to his last moments, knew it, wanted viciously to take revenge and was aware he never would be able to.

Keig finished his recital of the facts.

‘The girl, they tell me, is still alive,’ he said. ‘And for that reason I’m not going to have you shot.’

He turned to the two men still holding upright the gross figure in front of him.

‘Take him outside,’ he said. ‘Tie him to a tree well out in the open, take the trousers off him and we’ll see what he looks like in the morning.’

It was, of course, a brutal sentence. Brutal and crude. But I do not think a single man who heard it, and who had heard the day before what had been done to Maria Joughin, doubted for one moment its justice.

I have had my doubts about it since. But at the time I simply felt that Keig had put into action exactly what we all wanted.

The two men by Lewie’s side shoved him forward and half marched, half propelled him out of the hut. Several of the others followed. They came back inside about fifteen minutes later.

Keig did not have to ask them whether his sentence had been properly carried out.

I heard, much later, about what happened to the man Lewie after we had released him next day. A group of us took him to a place at the edge of the wolds while the rest of us were hastily packing up the headquarters where we had intended to spend some time and were moving on as fast as possible to somewhere else well out of the way. When he was found by some of his own searching Keepers he had been taken as fast as a car could drive to Lesneven and given the very best care the hospital there could provide—including the personal attention of Mr Mylchraine’s own specialist, my brother John—but of course once frostbite has done its work there is no way of putting right

the major injury it has caused. Lewie was got on his feet again but within a year he had taken his own life. He did it in the traditional Lesneven way, throwing himself into the sea at the height of the flood-tide from the walls of the Old Watch-point, a picturesque semi-ruin looking out across the whirling channel between the mainland and the Kernel.

But the savage punishment we had meted out to him was not the end of the affair locally either—as we might well have known it would not be. There came inevitably another development. We heard about it less than a week after we had, as it were, flung the maimed Lewie back into Mylchraine's lap.

It was about midday at our new headquarters, a deserted lodge used for that gentlemanly Oceana sport of hawking. Keig and I were the only ones there. Keig, who had been out on a reconnaissance trip the night before, was asleep and I was busy copying out with a stub of pencil on some sheets torn from an exercise book the words of a leading article in the *Irish Times* commenting fairly sharply on Mr Mylchraine's rule which Cormode had sent us over the wireless. When we could we distributed such items, and we knew that these scruffy sheets of ours were passed from hand to hand over an unexpectedly large area of the island, penetrating sometimes right down to the south before they fell to pieces with much reading.

Suddenly I heard from a distance the sound of one of our sentries giving a challenge. At once the hair rose on the back of my scalp like an animal's. There should have been no one coming near the lodge at that hour.

I jumped up and shook Keig.

'Sentry's challenging someone,' I whispered.

Keig shook himself quickly awake. I noticed, as I had done once or twice before, that his hand went first to his old axe, which lay beside him on the bracken covering the wooden

bedstead in lieu of a mattress. Only when he had felt the smoothness of the axe's time-polished haft did he then check with a quick tap his revolver.

A few moments later we heard a low call coming from the distant sentry to the guard nearer the lodge door.

'Pat Boddaugh coming with news for Mr Keig.'

Keig and I looked at each other. Big Pat Boddaugh had been sent on a food-prospecting expedition with a side task of taking a look at the Joughins' house, where Maria was now back with her family. He should not have been back for a couple of hours yet.

The instant he came in to us we knew that something pretty bad had happened. Normally so aggressive, he was now entirely emptied of bounce.

He stood there in the doorway looking at Keig and myself with his big hands dangling.

'What is it, man?' Keig said.

'It—It's the—Mr Keig, they've done something terrible.'

'They? The Keepers?'

'Yes, Mr Keig.'

Big Pat Boddaugh's normally noisy voice was reduced to a half-audible mutter.

'Sit down,' Keig said sharply. 'Go and sit there on the bed.'

The big man obeyed without a word.

'Now,' Keig said, facing him, 'the Keepers have done something terrible. Tell me just what.'

'It's the Joughins, Mr Keig. When I got near the house there was a dog howling. Sitting there in broad daylight and howling. I ran in. Mr Keig, it was the women. The men had been shot, Mr Keig. They were lying there, all three of them. But it was the women.'

‘Come on, tell me.’

‘Mr Keig, there’s a wooden paling there. It runs all along the back of the yard. It’s high, about five foot. They’d been fastened to it, Mr Keig. Maria, her mother and the two married sisters. I knew them all. I’d met them. In the summer. I spent a day with them. Mr Keig, they’d been stripped of every stitch of their clothing, and killed. Each one with one of those hunting knives the Keepers have. The long ones, you know. Up between their legs, Mr Keig.’

And for the second time in little over a week I saw a dark flush of rage come up into Keig’s face.

‘You, Boddaugh,’ he said. ‘I want you to go down to Kerity again, right away. Be careful, mind. They’ll be expecting something from us, and they’ll be jumpy as cats. But find out for me the name of every Keeper in the force there. Every one, you understand. If you can’t get ’em all today, come back at dusk and we’ll try again tomorrow.’

Boddaugh got up from the bed. There was a look of determination about him again. His arms no longer hung slack.

Keig turned to me.

‘You know where the men are,’ he said. ‘Set about getting them back in. I want them all here. Tonight.’

They came to the lodge in twos and threes, mostly after it had begun to get dark and movement was safer. Each group took as a matter of course the long way round, getting up into a straggle of pine trees two hundred yards or so above us on the mountainside and then dropping down through a sweep of broken rocks that brought them to the back of the little single-storey house so that the snow would seem to lie untrodden all round.

By seven o'clock, a quarter of an hour before the meeting was to begin, the whole group was assembled. Twenty-five men and all of them tense and angry.

Keig was out somewhere. He had left me a note saying he would be back at seven-fifteen. I looked at my watch. Thirteen minutes past seven, unless the cold had affected it again. Keig would come in at any moment now. Punctuality was strict with him, not as a fetish but because, he once said to me, 'It makes it harder if you're late.'

And, sure enough, our sentry near the back door could be heard calling a quiet challenge now, and a few seconds later Keig came in.

We were all assembled in the biggest of the three rooms of the lodge, part kitchen, part living-room. It was full to bursting with the twenty-five of us, a good many pretty hefty characters, but those nearest the door shoved themselves back a little to make a space round Keig. He stood in silence looking at us all as we sat on the floor or stood leaning against the walls. His face, I saw, was back to its old total impassivity. I wondered what he had been doing to be away so long.

The silence in the fuggily warm room grew. No one was likely to chat at a time like this.

But at last the wait had gone on so long that the hard-to-repress Fred Quiddie broke the silence.

'Come on, Mr Keig,' he said. 'Tell us how we're going to tear those bastards apart.'

'We're not,' said Keig.

A blank silence followed his announcement. The men who had heard him were ordinary enough unsophisticated people, and I could almost see from their expressions brains whirring like machinery slipping its clutch as they tried to get to grips with what he had said.

There was going to be no counter-action after the appalling outrage the Keepers had committed against those four women. That was all there was to it. Keig's words could have meant nothing else. But to those hearing him it was inconceivable that he should have said what he did.

Then the reaction began. It should, I suppose, have been Fred Quiddie who started it: his was the most eager mind there. But he worshipped Keig, for all his customary irreverence, and he sat now with every emotion wiped from his features in a howlback of contradictory feelings. And it was burly Pat Boddaugh who spoke.

'We're bloody well going to crucify them,' he declared.

'No,' Keig said.

For a moment I was afraid he was going to say no more. But this was to be one of the occasions when he did give an explanation of a decision he had reached.

'I know it's hard, lads,' he said abruptly. 'But we're not going to do anything. Nothing at all.'

No one moved so much as a muscle.

'I was half the afternoon out there on the mountain thinking this out,' Keig went on slowly. 'And by the time I'd finished I was certain sure there was nothing at all for it but to leave it be. What that man Lewie did to Maria first off was past forgiving. And we punished him for it, and punished him justly. Well, the Keepers have taken a revenge for that. And the heart of it is they weren't men enough to take their revenge on us.'

He looked round at the assembly of intent faces, listening hard but still not understanding.

'When I heard the news from Boddaugh,' he said, 'I began from there out thinking on the best way to get back at every one of the Keepers who'd had any hand in it at all. I thought of half a dozen ways. Those men have wives, too, daughters

and sweethearts. They could pay. And then I began to think beyond that. Those men pay, and what next? We don't pay again but other folk pay, folk who've nothing to do with all this except maybe for showing us a bit of friendliness. They pay and pay double.'

The deep-set eyes came slowly to glowing-point as I watched.

'No,' he said, his voice for once rising loudly. 'No, it's got to come to an end. It's got to stop somewhere, and it's going to stop with us. We're the ones strong enough to do it.'

And there he left it. He stood for several long moments more, certainly, in front of his hostile audience. But he did not say another word.

And reluctantly, like slab-ice breaking from the pressure of some warm flow beneath, they surrendered to him. Nothing was said. But it could be seen. In a face turned away, in the shifting of a pair of shoulders, in the inward-turning of an expression.

Keig had won. He had convinced them.

At last Fred Quiddie suddenly bounced to his feet.

'Well,' he said, 'I need a piss. I'm off.'

Part Four

1

The next day spring came, as if to put the seal of approval on that heroic decision of Keig's. Or so I put it to myself for a brief period, though I found it too airy a notion to keep for long in the furniture of the mind. But it was the next day that spring did come, like a charge of wild horses as it does sometimes in the mountains. Sweet heavy rain fell. The snow disappeared in a morning. And within three weeks our whole struggle had been transformed.

This, however, owed nothing to the weather. It had been prepared, indeed, during the grip of the cold though we had known nothing of it. What happened was that Mylchraine declared through the creaky old *Oceana Messenger*—‘Yes, but where's it taking the message to?’—that he was to be known not as Mr President (to which name, relic of the Rota, he had hitherto been entitled) but instead as Grand Master of Oceana.

In this he was staking a claim to something more than the dominance arrived at by the chance processes of power-seeking: he was decreeing for himself a spiritual overlordship, if an inverted one. All the nasty, only half-overt business of sabbats and esbats, of covens and their masters, of at one end of the scale a girl stripping herself for public flogging under Mylchraine's own eye, and at the other end a plump village grocer receiving in all solemnity the Kiss of Shame—all this was now to be incorporated in the outward and everyday life of Oceana.

But to this claim there had come a vigorous and unexpected objection. It was from a man called Marcus Calo, an estate-owner whose lands lay in the southernmost part of the wolds. Up to this period Calo had tolerated Mylchraine as an eccentric departure from the way estate-owners ought to live. But a few days after the change-of-style announcement he had occasion to write to him and called him 'My dear Mylchraine'. Mylchraine returned the letter, and a row developed which ended in Mylchraine sending a squad of Keepers to arrest Calo.

But he misjudged his man, as he would never have done in the days when he played on all the island's weaknesses to climb to power. Calo was a man of genuine fearlessness. He took a riding-crop to the Keepers.

That was a declaration of war. And Mylchraine in fact used the war weapons he had imported to fight Keig, though in deference perhaps to Calo's status he did not order the planes to drop napalm. Instead he sent them to buzz Calo's big house not far from the little lobster port of Caloestown. I gather the machines scared the servants to fits, stampeded the cattle and altogether made it unmistakably clear who was top dog.

But here Calo played a masterstroke: he kept his patience. He appeared to do nothing, while with all the fierce energy he usually reserved for point-to-point steeplechasing, hawking and other Oceanan gentlemanly pleasures he sent his Overseer—the term is the island equivalent to bailiff—lickety-spit to Europe to buy one fully-equipped field gun. Just that.

It was taken to within range of Mylchraine's airstrip. I do not know but I have always imagined that an observation party hid in the very same elm spinney where Keig, Fred Quiddie, Pat Boddagh and I had gazed impotently at the

hangar's defences. In any case, in ten minutes' work all Mylchraine's planes were destroyed.

Having swept aside this apparently insuperable obstacle—though later I learnt that the napalm stock itself had been removed—Calo recruited an army of his own simply by riding round his estate and indicating with his never-absent riding-crop anybody that took his fancy. At the beginning of April, then, he launched himself at the Keepers, and by the middle of that month we in the north found there was only the scantiest force left to oppose us. Keig was not slow. We swept out of the mountains.

For the first time in seven long months we were able to behave like men and not hunted animals. We took off our clothes. Indeed we burnt most of them they stank so vilely. And, if we did not take to collars and ties ourselves, at least the sight of other people wearing them, which at our first entry into the towns had seemed distinctly odd, soon became unremarkable. We ate, too. Regular meals of as much as we needed. And poor Fred Quiddie had almost to be forcibly held back from the girls.

By the end of that April we were back where we had been the previous summer, within sight of Lesneven. By that time too, of course, we had discovered what we owed our change of fortune to. It was something some of us greeted with mixed feelings.

'Calo,' Pat Boddaugh exploded. 'What's Calo ever done? He never spent a winter in the mountains longing for just one bite of decent grub.'

'He's fighting Mylchraine,' Keig answered.

And fighting Mylchraine he was. He put every one of his brutally recruited men on to horseback, even dressing them in a uniform of tight long-skirted jackets of a hard-wearing material called brown holland used in the island to make overalls for schoolchildren, and then he ranged the island

far and wide. Because in backward Oceana, if nowhere else, a force of cavalry able to move independently of the roads and the scout-cars that roamed them was still a notably efficient way of making war.

We even got the bitter-sweet news of Calo triumphs via our wireless link with the Revolutionary Council. Cormode was much struck with the man the papers soon began to call 'the last of the cavalrymen'.

More galling still, it was my duty to type out such news on a cumbersome wooden-base typewriter with a curious purple ribbon that we had acquired and to make copies for clandestine distribution on an old-fashioned gelatine reproducing machine, enormously messy to the hands if somewhat satisfying to the spirit of a wedded journalist. And, oddly, it seemed that the wolds people, even from villages like the one where I was told 'No one beyond a child, ever goes running here', were decidedly dazzled by the dashing figure of Marcus Calo.

Not that we too did not have our steady stream of young girls offering themselves as recruits because of Keig. I had noticed a similar influx the summer before when we had had few tasks suitable for them. Now, however, with the increasing area under our control Keig accepted such offers by the dozen, perfectly oblivious that most came solely on his account, bright wasps determined to sacrifice themselves in a dish of jam.

I used to wonder a little at his monolithic indifference. I knew indeed he was capable of loving a woman. Yet I believe these girls, however blatant, meant absolutely nothing to him. From the moment more than five years before when Mylchraine's Keepers had dragged him from his farm on the Kernel he had been a man unequipped for pleasure.

In fact, before long I was to receive dramatic proof of this steadfastness, a quality which incidentally he took for granted in the rest of us though I knew Fred Quiddie, for one, frequently failed to live up to it.

My proof came from one of the new recruits, though an unusual one, a bright twenty-one-year-old called Jane Ivens, just back from Trinity College, Dublin. I had rather more to do with her than with the others because she brought a whiff of the forgotten world of books and newspapers. But she had eyes only for Keig.

‘My God, Michael,’ she said once, ‘isn’t he marvellous? I mean, to believe in justice, to really believe. I mean, not just metaphysically but in an absolutely existential way. I’d do anything for him. You know that, don’t you? Anything.’

I smiled. She would learn.

Or, I wondered suddenly, would she? Had she perhaps a zest and a certain vigour of mind which might after all penetrate Keig’s rhinoceros hide?

A few days after this conversation it came out that she knew Calo—‘I mean, not exactly know. I can’t say I’ve got a great deal in common with someone like that. But I have met him. With Daddy.’

Keig decided to put this to use. Our attempts to achieve liaison with Calo’s forces had been up till now blankly rebuffed, and recently there had been an unpleasant incident when an attack that Fred Quiddie was to have led against a Keepers’ post at a little place called Rostrennan had been anticipated by Calo’s troopers. They had not only shot the Keepers but had been afterwards loosed in a riot of rape and robbery, even killing an old woman who had protested. This had been a Particularly bad setback for us since we had intended to occupy Rostrennan semipermanently.

However Jane's mission failed. I heard later that Calo had been tickled pink at our envoy but had declined to take her at all seriously. He had even offered her a job as his 'secretary'.

Outraged, Jane—she had read a lot of ethics but had kept untarnished the fairy-story morality of her childhood—had told Calo how badly he compared with Keig. He had laughed.

'All right then, back you go to your son-of-the-soil hero, my dear. But don't expect that sort of person to get the better of Rolph Mylchraine. That's something that requires a bit of handling.'

I suppose these may have been the very words that fired poor Jane's passionate generalized admiration for Keig into something more directly personal. But whatever it was, she came back north as fast as she could on the farm horse that had been all the transport we could provide in our petrol-starved territory. She had had a bad journey too, having to hide from patrolling Keepers once full-length in a water-filled ditch while her mount innocuously grazed. But, of course, danger served only to make Keig a yet more wonderful figure to her.

When she arrived at the farm we were making our headquarters she was passed on to me as I was that evening the inner guard. Standing in a clump of overgrown lilacs to get some shelter from a cloaky night, I pointed out to her across the farmyard the empty loose-box where Keig was at work.

She looked at me as if she was going to say something then, but instead suddenly turned away and crossed the farmyard at a run. I heard her tap at the loose-box door and then out of the corner of my eye saw, as I went back to watching the sloping pastures in front of me, a faint splash of

golden light when the two halves of the door were opened one by one.

I must have got Particularly absorbed because it was only after some ten minutes that I became aware that Jane had not come out after making her report. With anyone other than Keig this would not have been unduly long, but Keig's way with reports was invariable. He listened, perhaps put a question, said 'thank you', nodded dismissal and retired into himself to consider.

So ... So that had been what Jane had half-wanted to say to me. I allowed myself a quiet smile.

And just at that moment the two half-doors of the loose-box were flung back with a sharp clack-clack in the quiet of the night and a figure shot out and crossed the miry farmyard like an arrow.

It was Jane, of course. She was running straight towards me and I guessed she had forgotten that I was sheltering there in the bushes. I was still wondering if I should step even farther back when she came cannoning right into me and gave a little, instantly suppressed, squeak of shock.

'Here,' I said, putting an arm out to stop her falling, 'steady on.'

She looked up at me. Her face—she was one of those pale girls whom you see to have a delicacy of complexion only when you are right up close to them—was an oval blur of whiteness in the dark under the lilacs.

'Michael,' she said.

She gave a little sob.

'I'd completely forgotten you were there.'

And then it came, the outpouring.

'Michael, I did it. I offered. Michael, I never have—and, damn it, I stripped for him. I went and gave him my report.

Thank you, he said. And he turned back to that slate of his. I stood there. I was trembling. In the front of my legs. And I thought "I must do it now." So while he sat there I did. I took off my clothes, every stitch. And I waited and waited. But he just went on working. And then I said "Mr Keig" and he looked up. "Please," I said. Michael, he didn't move a muscle. He just looked at me, like he always does. And then he said: "I want you to leave for home at six tomorrow morning." Just that. Oh, Michael.'

She buried her head on my chest and in a moment I felt the warm wetness of her tears gradually seep through my shirt. And then after a while she stopped sobbing and looked up at me again.

I saw that she had Parted her lips and held them under my face just a little too far away for me to kiss without the move coming from me. It's a way some women have, done often without realizing just what they are doing, I think. And now it placed a dilemma before me. Should I bend my head down to hers, with the inevitable consequences? Or should I not, remembering that however she felt I was here as a sentry, guarding Keig and the rest of them? And yet ... And yet I, who had in my London days gone from one girl to another, never without when I really badly enough wanted one, I had now gone for more than two years, ever since Keig had re-enlisted me in Dublin, without so much as a kiss, and for much longer without any regular liaison, here was I being offered that sweet sensuous brief oblivion. Shouldn't I take it?

And for once indecision, my ineradicable vice, proved the right course. Suddenly Jane reached up and kissed me, warmly, pleadingly, cravingly. I pulled her deeper into the lilacs. Keig might be always above human weakness: I was not.

I had just said goodbye to her—‘Michael. Sorry. Thank you. Oh, damn, one never thinks of the ethics of things till it’s too late’—when I caught sight of the band of golden light spreading across the yard behind me as the top door of the loose-box opened and Keig leant out.

‘Quine. Is that you on guard there?’

‘Yes.’

‘Call someone to take your place. I want you.’

I found him sitting with his orangey-capped bullet head bowed over the slate on his knees totting up figures by the light of a single oil-lamp. He told me briefly and without comment that Jane had failed with Calo.

‘You know his sort,’ he concluded. ‘D’you think he’d be different with another messenger, one of the lads?’

I told him I doubted it, and went on to give my reasons.

In the middle suddenly I faltered. It had flooded in on me that if Keig had happened to come right outside to find me a quarter of an hour earlier he might well have shot me as a sentry neglecting his duty.

‘Go on, man,’ he barked.

I picked up the process of my reasoning by its coat-tails and quickly finished.

Keig sat still for a few moments, eyes withdrawn. Then he stood up.

‘I’m going to Calo myself,’ he said.

But it was not until almost a month later, after we had succeeded in ambushing two scout-cars together within ten miles of Lesneven, that Calo even agreed to a meeting. And even then he insisted it was to be at his own house and that only three of us were to come.

‘But, listen, Mr Keig,’ bright, loyal, cheerfully pleasure-loving Fred Quiddie had said, ‘what if old Calo wants to kidnap you or something?’

‘Perhaps he does,’ replied Keig tranquilly. ‘But I’ll be ready for him. And he won’t be counting on that.’

So it was big Pat Boddaugh and myself who went with him, by bicycle for want of other transport. Boddaugh came because he would be a good man in a scrap, and myself, I suspected, because Keig still had some undealt with anxieties about meeting ‘a gentleman’ in his own house.

And the house when, dusty and dishevelled, we arrived at it showed that any doubts he did have were going to be amply tested. It even had a butler, with a striped waistcoat that bellied out in front of him like a ship of old coming into port. By him we were put for a long heel-cooling period into some sort of tenants’ waiting-room, from which in due turn we were fetched by a tall sombre man who introduced himself as Faragher, Calo’s Overseer.

He led us into what was obviously the main dining-room. It was a decidedly impressive place. The walls were panelled to the ceiling in dark shining oak, with at regular intervals round them glinting brass candle-sconces. Along its whole length ran a broad table as polished and as darkly gleaming as the panelling. Great leather-backed chairs were drawn up to this. Behind the one at the head there was a splendid marble fireplace, imported in the distant past from England or France, I guessed. Above it, huge but dim under thick varnish, hung a painting of some heroic hunting scene.

But it was only later that I came to take all this in. What held my eye as we crossed the threshold was the array of men clustered round the head of the long table. There must have been fifteen of them, two or three sitting in the big leather-backed chairs, the rest standing loungingly about. And all of them were armed to the teeth, with sten-guns,

pistols, and even knives and all wore the tight, long-skirted, shiny brown light jackets of Calo's army.

If it came to any sort of argument the three of us—Keig with his omnipresent axe, myself and Pat Boddaugh with revolvers—were going to look pretty silly. We stood now in a small defensive group near the door and stared across at the others while the sombre Faragher went over to join them. And what at once became apparent was that the big head-of-the-table chair was empty.

No one spoke a word to us. We stood where we were in silence. The others talked amongst themselves in low voices.

And then a door opened at the far end of the room and Marcus Calo was there.

He was, I have to confess, a striking figure. Although he was nearer sixty than fifty, his slim and erect body was athletic-looking as a twenty-year-old's. He wore breeches and beautifully-shaped and brilliantly polished riding boots, a short hacking jacket and, his sole touch of eccentricity, a black stock at the throat of his open-necked white shirt. And he carried that riding-crop we had heard about.

He walked without a word along the whole length of the far side of the big table and took his seat at its head. Only then did he look at us, one deliberate glance with an eyebrow slightly cocked in his taut-skinned hook-nosed face.

It was left to Keig to break the silence.

'Would you be Marcus Calo?' he said.

I felt a quick spurt of pride. Keig had not been overawed then by all the dramatic business. He was neither going to accept that he must know who the great Calo was, but neither was he going to get involved in any silly game of pretending not to know to whom he was talking. Perhaps the odds were not so uneven as I had thought.

No doubt Calo too found more in Keig's remark than he had expected, because he turned almost at once to the brown-jacketed mob behind him and said 'I think we might have some refreshment, will someone have the goodness to pull that bellcord?'

With only the slightest of delays a uniformed footman appeared at the door behind us.

'Whiskey, Arthur,' Calo said.

When the man had gone Calo leant towards us.

'Tell me, Mr Keig,' he said conversationally, 'how many men do you have at your command?'

I reckoned that he probably knew pretty well that the disparity between Keig's forces and his was much the same as the disparity between the three of us on our side of the wide table and the lounging mob behind him. I wondered how Keig would handle this demand for precise information. For a moment or two he simply said nothing, and I could tell by the withdrawn look of those dark eyes of his that he was giving himself time to think. Then he answered.

'I'll maybe tell you later,' he said to Calo. 'When I've more reason to trust you.'

I thought the mild warmth which the meeting had taken on might vanish abruptly at this, but, perhaps luckily, the footman returned at that moment with a loaded tray and Calo stood up. There was a certain amount of toing-and-froing while everyone was served. None of the bodyguards behind Calo however made the least move to approach us.

And then as the footman served Keig—'Soda or water, sir?' 'What? Oh, water. Water.'—I realized that a new if minor dilemma was on us. It was more than two years now to my knowledge since Keig had taken any alcohol and his weak head was certain to be even weaker. How was he going to cope?

Calo, standing now at the head of the long table talking earnestly to the sombre Faragher, abruptly raised his glass.

‘I give you a toast, gentlemen,’ he called down to us. ‘Mylchraine—till he’s been hunted down like a fat rat.’

There was a roar of laughter from the men behind him and glasses were caught up and flourished. Calo emptied his own—and it was no small one—at a swallow. Taking a rapid sip myself, I watched Keig. He raised his glass to his lips. And then he put it quickly down again on the glinting surface of the table in front of him. I calculated that he could hardly have taken a drop.

We continued to stand there in our two groups, with the footman very busy round Calo and his swaggering followers and also doing his best to create an equal amount of work out of Keig, Pat Boddaugh and myself by stepping up and refilling our glasses before they were a third empty. But I allowed this to happen only twice before putting my fingers quite frankly over both my glass and poor Boddaugh’s. All three of us were going to need to keep cool heads.

Keig’s glass, I saw, remained so full that with the best will in the world no one could have got a flick more into it. And in any case before many minutes had passed he pulled back the chair he had taken before, sat down in it again and pushed the glass firmly away as if clearing a space to work.

And, as I mentally applauded this little manoeuvre, he raised his head and gave something like a glare towards Calo.

‘I’m wanting to get well along the road back tonight,’ he said. ‘So I’ve no time to spare, if you please.’

I saw Calo smile.

It was a cold smile, and I was quite unable to tell whether it meant that he was impressed by Keig or inwardly

infuriated. Whichever it was, Keig simply ignored it and leant purposefully forward.

‘Four weeks ago yesterday,’ he said growlingly, ‘a party of your men rode into the village of Rostrennan and shot the Keepers in the post there. But that wasn’t all they did. They shot an old woman, too, an old woman who’d done no more than lay her tongue to them for what they’d done to her daughter.’

Calo dropped back into his high-backed chair.

‘My dear chap,’ he said, ‘you’ll have to learn, you know, that when the hunt’s up a few hedges are bound to be broken.’

Beside me I felt big Pat Boddagh surge forward in an outbreak of quick mountain man’s temper. I gripped him hard by the forearm. With all that battery of weapons in the group behind Calo we certainly could not afford anything that looked like starting a roughhouse. In front of us Keig was sitting rock still.

‘I’ve seen innocent folk suffer often enough since I set up against Mylchraine,’ he said. ‘I know what that means. But this old woman needn’t ever have been killed at all.’

Calo simply went on smiling.

‘Mr Keig,’ he said, ‘if all you’ve come here for is to bring me a lot of caterwauling stories of that sort you might as well go straight back where you came from—since you’re in so much of a hurry.’

‘I came for a great deal more than that,’ Keig answered, still managing to keep calm. ‘Let me tell you something. When your men left Rostrennan they left every soul in the place believing in Mylchraine. Now, it’d have been damn useful to me to have had men of my own staying quietly thereabouts. But after you’d been in it there was nothing at

all to do but keep well away, unless we wanted the Keepers told of every last thing we did. So who gained from all that?’

He seemed to expect Calo to reply to this accusation, which was an unusually long-winded speech for him. And when nothing was said he lifted up a heavy fist and banged it down on the polished surface of the table.

‘Mylchraine gained,’ he said loudly. ‘Mylchraine and none other.’

Calo seemed perfectly unimpressed.

‘My dear fellow,’ he said, ‘I hope you’re not suggesting that I can’t deal with that unpleasant person’s followers as and when I please.’

‘If I’d known you intended to deal with the Keepers in Rostrennan,’ Keig replied, baffledly sticking to his point, ‘I’d have used my men on some other job, wouldn’t I?’

‘You know, Mr Keig,’ Calo said, in an infuriating tone of reasonableness, ‘it doesn’t much concern me where you use your men, or what you use them for—so long as they don’t start trying to preach morality to my lot.’

Again I put a warning hand on Pat Boddaugh’s sleeve. Keig still sat there calm enough to all outward appearances, but I thought I detected barely checked fury when he spoke.

‘But you want to see Mylchraine finished, don’t you?’ he demanded of Calo.

‘The fellow does need teaching a lesson, of course.’

‘He needs more than teaching a lesson,’ Keig broke in. ‘He needs to be toppled. Just that. And if you’ll only listen to reason he can be toppled all the faster.’

‘Toppled?’ Calo said. ‘I’m not sure I like that sort of talk.’

‘It’s the sort of talk you’ll get,’ Keig retorted. ‘It says what’s plain true. Mylchraine’s got to be toppled, and the sooner I can get some guns to match those scout-cars of his

the sooner I can fight my way into Lesneven and get at him.'

'My dear chap, I don't think you need worry your head about that. Enough good men on enough good horses and I'll be dealing with Mylchraine in Lesneven the moment it suits me.'

There was a murmur of boastful barking laughter at this from the over-armed crew in the background. Keig looked up and glared at them and then returned to Calo like an obstinate bulldog.

'You'll not get to Lesneven without guns,' he declared.

Calo's taut-skinned face moved slowly into another cold smile.

'Shall we see about that?' he replied.

'We should be seeing about getting guns in from Dublin through the harbour at Caloestown,' Keig shouted.

I looked over at Calo now with double intentness. This was where we might learn what Cormode in Dublin was doing with all those funds of his.

But the fleshless face betrayed absolutely nothing.

'I don't think you need concern yourself with guns, Mr Keig. I've told you: Mylchraine won't cause me all that trouble.'

He stood up now, in one lithe movement that made him seem twenty years younger than he was. He picked up the riding-crop which had been lying on the table in front of him.

'You know,' he said, looking at Keig with one eyebrow just a little raised, 'you and I are not generals, my dear chap. I'm—Well, I'm a hunting man. And you?'

He paused for a moment. The armed men behind him suddenly stiffened.

‘What shall I call you now I’ve had a look at you? A game-beater, I think. Yes, that’s your job. You just go on making a lot of noise up at your end of the shoot, and you’ll be doing well enough. And now good day to you.’

Keig sat quite still. But it can only have been for a couple of seconds. Then he stood up. He shoved back his big chair with an awkward scrape and marched out of the door.

We followed him. There was nothing else to do.

2

Poor naïve high-tempered Pat Boddaugh tried to say something to Keig about it all when we had mounted those humiliating dirty bicycles of ours and had pedalled down the long beautifully kept drive of the big house, out through the heavy double ironwork gates and away down the summer-dusty road till we had felt comparatively free.

‘What’ll you do to him, Mr Keig?’ he burst out, hauling up at the handlebars of his machine as if he wanted to lift it bodily off the road in front of him and hurl it at someone.

Keig simply made no reply.

Pedalling toilingly along behind those broad shoulders of his, I thought over and over our whole meeting with Calo. One thing about it all was crystal clear, try to get round it how I might: Keig had suffered a defeat. Yet, I thought, what could he have done other than what he did? With that armed pack standing insolently behind Calo we really did have to take any insults we were given. And if Calo chose to pay no attention to sensible suggestions about co-operating in the fight against Mylchraine, then he chose to pay no attention. We could not make him do what was best.

So we had to accept the defeat. Yet a good many questions remained to answer. I wished I could ask Keig them, but plainly I could not.

He had adopted the solitariness of the man who leads, and to try to share his thoughts would be perhaps to deflect him, even to weaken him fatally.

So I said not a word. But I wondered. Would he eventually try to take on Calo as well as Mylchraine? The distant lonely man would never tell me till the time to do whatever it was that he had decided on was near.

Yet just how distant and lonely Keig was I had not even then fully taken into account. I was to do quite soon however, and in a way which shook my faith in him to its foundations.

First, we arrived back to bad news. The Keepers had retaliated with a new ferocity to our successful attack on the two scout-cars which had earned us our doubtfully worth-having visit to Marcus Calo. Retaliation, of course, we had expected. Our struggle was in those terms now: for each strike we made the Keepers would strike back and strike terror too, and then it became up to us to show people in our part of the island that we had not been intimidated.

But on this occasion the Keepers' retaliation had been at a new peak of savagery. They had made a sudden descent on the tiny hamlet where the men who had conducted the attack on the cars were hiding and they had destroyed every living thing there, fighting men, whole families and every creature down to the chickens. And, worse, it looked as if this had been made possible because a girl from the destroyed hamlet had been going out with a Keeper.

Keig then sent express orders to every one of our groups to avoid all places where there was any doubt about women in a position to betray us—and equally on our part to avoid, above all, similar contact with women who might have links with the Keepers, which in the close-knit communities of the island was a fairly likely occurrence. It was, I think, the first general directive of this sort Keig had issued. He distrusted all the trappings of military life but circumstances make some sort of militarist of any man who takes on himself a

general's role—as Keig, for all Calo's derision, had certainly done.

But a worse blow, far, was to fall before long. And it fell all the harder for coming out of the blue.

Almost indeed it seemed to come literally out of the blue because we had entered again one of those long periods of magnificently fine weather that characterized all that summer in Oceana. We were, it goes without saying, in yet another headquarters at the time. This was an unusually grand one, part of one of the island's big houses. The owner had either preferred to stay in Lesneven, or more likely had taken himself off to England where a good many of the estate-owners preferred to stay while Mylchraine cleared up the mess they saw the island as having got into. And Keig had taken over various Parts of the house in his absence, not without punctiliously ordering accounts to be kept and leaving a letter addressed to 'The Occupier' saying that any claim made would be met on its merits. For his personal quarters, both dormitory and command post, Keig used the house's old conservatory.

It should have been steamily hot with the fineness of the weather but the palms in their pots and the long juicy-leaved creepers had become so overgrown that the place was in fact the most comfortable part of the whole big house. In it Keig sat every day under an obese miniature palm, scaly-trunked and thick, with beside him two small tables on which rested one of our prize captures, a large map of the whole of Oceana. I remember with extraordinary vividness even now the irritating way in which the two tables were not exactly the same height so that there was an awkward area in the middle of the map—it fell just south of Lesneven—where one could not point to anything without sending any markers put down elsewhere skittering out of place.

I was standing beside the map receiving instructions from Keig, which I would later divide up into orders to go to the different groups involved, when there came a sharp tap on the coloured glass-framed door that led to the rest of the house. I turned and recognized through the brownish glass of the door's centre panel the primly tubby outline of Francis Crowe.

'Yes,' Keig called out, without looking up.

Crowe came in. Even in the greeny light of the conservatory I could see at once that something had happened. Crowe's normally rounded and even self-satisfied face looked almost haggard.

'Mr Keig,' he said with unusual over-formality, 'I've been asked to make a report.'

'You've been asked to do what?' Keig inquired, with a touch of sheer incredulity.

'Mr Keig. It's about Quiddie.'

'Quiddie's over at Kermaddack,' Keig said.

Fred Quiddie was in charge of a group of something over fifty men in the vicinity of the small town of Kermaddack, responsible for the area immediately to the west of Lesneven. It was an important command, perhaps our most important of all, because not only did it mean pressing in as closely as possible to the capital itself but it was also exposed to the powerful thrusting raids of Calo and his troopers.

Francis Crowe straightened his back and jutted out his plump hips in an effort to put things into their most strictly military perspective.

'Yes,' he said. 'It's one of Quiddie's men from Kermaddack who brought the report in. Name of Innow.'

'Innow? Innow?' Keig said. 'I know him, don't I?'

‘He said he’d been recruited by us ourselves last summer, Mr Keig. But I don’t remember him.’

‘He’s thin,’ Keig said. ‘And older than most. A good forty, with not much flesh on his face, not much flesh on him at all. He was a shepherd. From the mountains.’

‘That’s him.’

‘And what’s this report he’s brought? About Quiddie you said?’

Surprisingly Francis Crowe did not answer. I took a pace forward and actually peered at him as if I was trying to read a distant small-print poster. And I saw the reason he was silent was simply that he could not bring himself to utter what he had to say next.

‘Speak up, man,’ Keig barked.

‘Mr Keig, Innow says that Quiddie has been slipping over to that place Rostrennan where they’re so against us and that he’s got a mistress there. And she’s the widow of one of the Keepers that Calo’s men shot, and it’s Rostrennan. If she told anyone there, they would put the Keepers on to him before you could say Jack Robinson. And—And none of us is perfect when they get to pulling out fingernails and there’s that red-hot poker thing, too. That’s all, Mr Keig.’

It had all come out in one great rush. And I could see at once why poor Crowe had not wanted to say it, and why he had been thrust in by the others to break the bad news. Because it was bad news, as bad as could be. Crowe was perfectly right: Fred Quiddie, who had been with us from the beginning, who had worshipped Keig ever since that night in the sea when Keig had fished him into the safety of the captured launch after the Marshall Tear débâcle, Fred Quiddie who had grown in stature and independence like the rest of us in the eighteen months we had fought in the island, had allowed himself to commit an incredible folly. He

had put himself in peril of being jerked from the arms of a woman by Keepers who could and would torture him into telling them how fifty of our men could be surrounded and wiped out. It was criminal, utterly criminal.

‘If Innow told you all this, why isn’t he in here now?’ Keig said sharply.

Without a word Francis Crowe turned back to the door with its coloured border of stained glass, opened it and called through.

‘Mr Keig wants to see Innow.’

A moment later Innow came in. Keig had remembered him pretty well. He was a lean person, lean in body, very lean in face with a peak of dark greying hair showing beneath his orangey-red woollen cap.

He stood there a few feet inside the door looking straight in front of him with a set hard gaze.

‘Now then,’ Keig said sharply. ‘What’s this about Quiddie?’

‘What Crowe told you, Mr Keig.’

‘You saw it. You tell me.’

Slowly Innow brought his deep-set eyes round to look at Keig.

‘I was on patrol,’ he said. ‘Guard patrol. Outside Kermaddack, over the Rostrennan way. I saw something moving and I went after it. It led me further than I meant to go, and then I saw it was only a dog and I started to hurry back. I’d been out of touch. That was when I saw him, and her.’

‘Who and who?’

‘Quiddie and the woman. The Keeper’s widow from Rostrennan.’

‘How did you know who she was?’

'I knew her,' Innow said with a sudden jet of fierceness. 'I knew her, the lascivious bitch. I'd seen her when I'd been on watch over Rostrennan, seen the way she looked at the men.'

'How did you know she was the Keeper's widow?' Keig thundered. 'Answer when I ask.'

Innow flinched.

'I had a lad with me when I saw her,' he said. 'A lad as used to visit in Rostrennan before we took him on. He told me. Told me all about her too.'

'Told you what about her?'

'That she was no better than she ought to be.'

'Just that? Was that all he told you? Just the words?'

Again Innow could not meet Keig's eyes.

'No,' he muttered. 'He told me what she did.'

'What did he tell you? What?'

'She went with men. Before Calo's troopers shot her husband and after.'

'What men did she go with? Did the lad tell you that?'

'Yes. Yes, he did, Mr Keig. I forget the names but he told me 'em. Dozens of 'em.'

'Dozens? There aren't dozens of men in Rostrennan. You're lying, man. Aren't you? Lying.'

'No. I swear not. I'm not. It maybe wasn't dozens. But he did give me names. Daniel Qualtrough, that was one. And there were more. There were. There were truly half a dozen. Six men he named.'

'And Quiddie? He was talking to her?'

Innow's lean body jerked forward from the hips.

'He was doing more than talking,' he said with savagery.

Keig looked at him steadily.

'Are you a married man, Innow?' he said.

'No.'

'Why not?'

Now Innow even darted me a glance, something like an appeal for help.

'Why aren't you married?' Keig demanded again.

Slowly Innow forced himself to look back.

'Why should I tell you something like that?' he said.

'I asked.'

There was a moment of utter silence. Then a tiny puff of air came in through a broken pane at the top of the conservatory and a hard flat tropical leaf tapped sharply against the ironwork supporting the roof.

'Never had much use for women,' Innow said grudgingly.

'Ever been with one?' Keig barked out.

'No.'

Innow's narrow mouth twisted momentarily.

'No, Mr Keig, I haven't,' he said. 'But I know what being with a woman's all about, and that was what Fred Quiddie was doing when I came upon him. That. He was getting up off her and laughing, he was. The slut.'

'You can go,' Keig said.

It took a second or two for the words to penetrate the blaze of hatred that plainly fired all the man's mind. Then he jerked to life, swung awkwardly round and, with shoulders going further back with every step, marched out of the green-shadowed conservatory.

'Someone fetch Quiddie,' Keig said when the door had closed.

They were not pleasant hours, the two hours that went by before Fred Quiddie came. I sent the most reliable man we had, a wonderful stocky calm fellow called Steven Dowan, on a motorcycle we had captured from the Keepers, authorizing the use of some of our small stock of precious-as-gold petrol.

And I wished blackly that on the way back the pair of them would chance on a patrolling scout-car and that it would all end that way. Keig had sent me off to distribute the orders he had given me, but I sat instead in the little servant's attic bedroom I slept in and dully let the time wash over me.

And then, worse than waiting for Fred to come, Fred came.

I had heard the sound of the motor-cycle perhaps a mile away in the quiet of the old-fashioned trafficless Oceanan afternoon, and I was down in the stableyard of the house waiting for him as he arrived. I think everyone else in our headquarters group was waiting nearby too, in some vague concealment or other—all except Keig.

It was plain from the moment I set eyes on Fred that he knew what must have happened, for all that Dowan had been given the strictest instructions to say nothing and would have stuck to them no matter what. Fred's slightly chubby perky face was set and pale and his eyes, which used to dart about like a sparrow's looking for crumbs, were staring constantly straight ahead. I was reminded of the time he had heard Keig say we were not going to take our revenge for the bestial murder of the women of the Joughin family. But then his chirpy features had been wiped of all expression: now they were expressive enough, though expressive of a grimness I had never associated with Fred even in our grimmest moments.

I stepped out to meet him.

'Keig wants to see you,' I said.

'Yes. Steve told me.'

We went, the three of us, through the oddly deserted kitchens of the big house, along an echoing corridor and down to the door of the conservatory. I knocked on the browned-over glass.

'Yes?' came Keig's voice.

'It's Quiddie,' I said.

'Bring him in.'

We went in. Francis Crowe was there, in his hand another long radio message carefully copied out in neat capitals, doubtless Cormode regaling us with a new account of some exploit of Calo's.

'All right, Crowe, we'll leave that a while,' Keig said.

I felt a little sense of shock: Keig did not drop things.

He laid down the board that had been across his knees and looked at Fred now.

'Quiddie,' he said, 'have you been love-making with a Keeper's widow in Rostrennan?'

Just that, the bare question. The key question.

I could not bring myself to look at Fred. But I heard him. His voice came as a sort of croak, though it was clear he was making every effort to speak up.

'Yes, Mr Keig. That's true.'

'You know you were risking the life of every man under you if you'd been taken by surprise by the Keepers?'

'Yes, Mr Keig.'

Keig looked away from him then. He turned slowly to the rest of us, myself, tubby mildly pompous Francis Crowe and decent honest reliable Steve Dowan.

‘You heard that?’ he said at last.

We each murmured our yes.

Keig stood up.

‘There’s only one thing I can do,’ he said.

He looked round the green conservatory with the odd splotches of sunshine coming through the overlapping broad leaves to dapple the pale-tiled floor. I wondered what he wanted. Then he spoke again.

‘Quiddie, stand here.’

He picked up the green-painted slatted chair he was accustomed to sit on and cleared a space in front of the stubby old miniature palm-tree. Then he gravely walked away along the pallid-tiled central aisle of the conservatory for about five long paces.

He swung round. Fred had gone over towards the palm, like a sonambulist I thought, had come up against the squat scaly trunk and had turned round. He looked at Keig now. His face was drained to a dead whiteness. His eyes stared unflinchingly through the green light.

Keig’s right hand had dropped to his side and came up again holding his revolver. I heard the tiny click of the safety-catch being pushed over. Keig raised the gun till it was level with his eyes and took careful aim.

There was only one shot. It boomed and echoed in the glass-walled conservatory like the sound of a cannon. Fred Quiddie’s head went smack back against the stubby trunk of the old palm. I saw for an instant the hole in his forehead, exactly between the eyes.

Then he slumped over to his left side and lay crumpled on the pale neatly patterned tiles. He was perfectly still.

3

That short scene—it had all happened inside five minutes from the moment I had knocked on the browned-over glass of the conservatory door till the instant Fred Quiddie’s body tumbled sideways into that huddled still shape on the pale tiles—was hardly once absent from my mind for days, even for weeks, afterwards.

I carried on with my work—we shifted our headquarters some eight or nine days later, and thankful I was—and the war against Mylchraine continued in ambush and counter-ambush, patrols and patrol-dodging and rapid neatly executed evacuation of our strong points when our intelligence network, which improved with every passing week, told us that the Keepers planned some strike in force. And I attended to my duties in it all, I think without slackening. But whenever my mind was not fully occupied I came back to that scene and the questions that lay behind it.

Had Keig, I asked myself, now moved beyond the proper heights necessary to command into the borderlands of that region where men of power come to believe their lightest whim is law?

Had he taken the irreversible step? Or was he at best almost committed to it? I tried to reason with myself that he was not. I polished in my mind like a talisman that curious moment years before when Keig and I had just succeeded in swimming our way free of the hunting Keepers and were hidden in that narrow sheltered dell on the shore of the

Kernel. In answer to something Keig had said then I had, foolishly, parroted out Acton's dictum about absolute power corrupting absolutely. And Keig had briefly questioned me about it, not with the hammering force he had now learnt to question with, but sharply enough. And, when he had satisfied himself on the facts, he had stated roughly but with unshakable certainty that the dictum was a mere half-truth. The statement had seemed then to come from the inner core of the man. But had it? Or had that inner core been unable to resist a rotting acid which had eaten into men with more training for the terrible responsibilities of power than Keig had even dreamt of?

I thought of other instances where his decisions had hovered on either side of that border which divides a necessary toughness from a secretly loved harshness. There had been his sudden, almost savage order that poor Donald Fayrhare's body was to be stuffed away like a dead dog's. Had that been the first sign of the hardening of a mind's arteries?

Then there were those extraordinary betraying sessions of boastful axe-play. And there had been the brutal certainty with which he had scattered the Participants in that naïve orgy in the church at Hoddick. And there had been all along his utter inability, or was it unwillingness, to see how Cormode might really be finding it difficult or even inadvisable to send us the anti-tank weapons we asked for. And then his loved Margaret's death when he had deliberately separated himself from her; that had affected him deeply I knew; but had it gone so deep that it had sent him off on a lone cold journey where no one could follow him?

And now was this summary, just—but terrible—execution of a faithful follower the setting of the final seal on a long process?

There was no telling. Only one thing could give the answer: time. I forced myself to suspend judgment.

Time passed. The hay was all made in the fields now and for a spell we had soft sprawly haystacks to hide behind while we waited beside some narrow rutted lane, across which we had either dug a deep steep-sided trench or had felled a tree, waiting for a scout-car to come and the sharp minutes of battle that were as elevating and as reality-removing as a suddenly presented bottle of champagne. Next the slow round of life on the island began to move to harvest time and our struggle took on its small consequent change in shape. But the fundamentals remained. Still the Keepers held Lesneven and the country round about it, quite impregnably it seemed. Regular scout-car patrols made it impossible for us to contemplate an attack unless we had the weapons to deal with them in circumstances of their choosing not ours, and these we continued to lack. And still Calo and his troopers rode furiously about the whole southern part of the island defeating the Keepers here and there and then disappearing as abruptly as they had come.

Nor were they the only disruptive elements. With the break-down of Mylchraine's administration everywhere except in the Lesneven area and some way further south, the various gangs of bandits that had existed ever since the Keepers had made life in the island troublesome now came into their own and robbed and looted whenever they got a chance.

The worst of them all was the gang led by the Dirk Gilhast we had first heard of as long ago as the day we had recruited young Alan Duckan at his father's Chestnut Tree Farm. And one night, after we had had news of yet another outrage, Keig announced that he intended to present Gilhast with an ultimatum.

And next day he sent off Francis Crowe to the cave in the mountains where we had learnt the bandit had his base. I had by now grown to expect Keig to delegate such missions—the days when he had led every attack we ever undertook himself seemed far away—but I was a little surprised at his choice of emissary. Yet, I reflected, Crowe like the rest of us had graduated, and I had no doubt the careful little barber of bygone days was perfectly capable of getting astride a horse, riding twenty miles or more across countryside in which he was liable to encounter men who would shoot on sight if they spotted his orangey-red cap, and finally tackling a brigand of Gilhast's sort, a rough and tough outlaw from Mylchraine's brutal semi-justice. I had even no doubt that Crowe would accomplish all this inside the strict timetable Keig had worked out for him—characteristically it included only twenty minutes for the actual negotiations: Keig had never been able to rid himself of the idea that anything that had to be said could be said in this time.

So I had no Particular anxieties as the long motionless August day drifted by. We had an open-air headquarters at the time, in a strip of coppery-leaved beechwood with a small stream running through it, and I recall the place and the time more clearly than most simply because, I think, the weather was so marvellous. Everything floated in a haze of natural benevolence, it seemed. The sun had shone for days from slow still dawn to calm exhausted nightfall. People moved about their tasks of the harvesting with a sort of torpid leisureliness soaked up from the dry heat. It gave them an air of contentment: everything seemed possible in some future in a world where nature was so promising of abundance with the packed golden fields of corn rustling only slightly from time to time in the hot stillness.

In the middle of the afternoon I was at work with my absurd duplicating outfit, kneeling with it in front of me on the soft beech-mast on the ground, a little hot and bothered

from having to keep at it in the dried-out somnolence. Several of the others were working or resting near by and Keig was a couple of yards away from me, sitting with his broad shoulders against the smooth trunk of a beech as mighty as himself, with his legs stuck out straight on the ground at an angle of sixty degrees from each other and with a sheet of paper on a board in front of him making out another of his endless ration lists—certain types of supplies were beginning to be a problem in our part of the island with communications to the harbour at Portharnel cut off.

And then we heard the quiet challenge of the distant sentry, a sound which even in this languid heat sent a chill of alarm through me.

We all listened in silence.

‘Bit early for Crowe,’ Keig said eventually. ‘Must be someone coming in with a message.’

We waited, and soon enough the messenger appeared, a large bald-headed man with the merest fringe of pale gingery hair round a big head. As he stood to make his report I saw his long fat pink-jowled face was dripping with sweat and his great paunch of a belly was making a patch of dark dampness on the creamy white shirt he wore.

Flies were buzzing and pinging around him.

‘I’ve been sent from over by Hoddick way,’ he said in a heavy rather aggrieved voice. ‘By bicycle. Haven’t been on a bicycle for more’n thirty year. And it’s a good way, must be—’

But Keig was unmerciful.

‘You’ve a message?’ he jabbed in. ‘What is it?’

The great sagging-paunched fellow took in a deep groaning breath.

‘From Mr Conilt, in charge at Hoddick,’ he began reciting.

I was already anxiously asking myself what message from the deserted little resort where we had twice had our headquarters could be so urgent. Our most advanced groups towards Lesneven operated from just south of the place and news from them was likely to be decidedly important.

The fat messenger brushed with a great pink ham of a hand at a couple of flies that had settled on his sweat-beaded face and went on.

‘Confirmed report that a force of eighty troopers under Mr Marcus Calo entered Lesneven at noon today,’ he recited. ‘Reports that they have set up a headquarters at the office of the *Oceana Messenger* received from two different sources. Mr Conilt requests orders about co-operation and advance into the town.’

A ham-hand slapped pettishly at a fly that had impudently landed on the great pink lobe of his left ear. It missed its target.

‘You can tell Conilt to stay put, nothing more,’ Keig said in his old, calmly matter-of-fact tone.

‘Oh,’ said the fat messenger.

He stood in front of us for a second or two longer, evidently expecting something a little more exciting to be said to him after his bringing of the bad news from Ghent to Aix. But, seeing eventually that Keig had ceased to pay any attention to him, he brushed with both huge pink hands at the flies once again and turned lumberingly and tramped off.

‘ ‘Spose I’ve got to bicycle all the way back now,’ I heard him mutter.

It was hard on the poor chap, slightly comic figure though he was, but I imagine no one felt like offering him any sympathy after the message he had come with.

Calo in Lesneven. It wanted some thinking about. Lesneven had seemed so impossibly beyond our reach these last months, as it had been in the summer before when we had watched it through field-glasses from the hills beyond Hoddick. And now, apparently without trouble, it had fallen. And all of us had been miles from the scene, busy with our little local struggles with Parties of Keepers or scout-car patrols. It had been Calo, too, Calo almost as callous of human needs and human life as Mylchraine himself, who had finally broken the last barrier.

Nobody seemed to know what to say.

I remember the long silence with the exhausted August afternoon air hanging, over-sweet with tired summer scents, all round us and Keig going on grimly with his lists, the sheet of paper he was writing on set squarely on the board across his legs.

It was stolid Steven Dowan, with clear unblinking eyes and a small frown of responsibility perpetually on his forehead, who took it on himself to speak.

‘Well, Mr Keig,’ he said, ‘so he got there before us.’

Keig looked up.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘He’s in Lesneven.’

But the very placidness of his voice under the shade of such an eclipse sent wriggling squirms of anxiety through my mind.

Yet it was an anxiety much more tangible and acute that was in my mind by that night. Francis Crowe failed to come back from the brigand Gilhast.

The time at which he ought to have reached us came and went and for a fair while I told myself there was nothing to be concerned about. Accidents of all sorts could so easily happen in the troubled island, for all Keig’s timetable of

what must be done when. But after the midnight courier had come and gone and all the news of the little barber was that he had reached Gilhast's hide-out on time, we all had to admit that something must have gone wrong.

And this time Keig did not delegate. He picked out a small force of us, Pat Boddaugh, myself, half a dozen others, and we set off on a night ride on horseback across the sleeping wolds and into the mountains.

We halted shortly before dawn and tethered the horses some distance away from the cave in the Trigastell Hills where Gilhast had his base. And, as the mountainside began to take on colour with the darkness seeping away the higher we climbed, we cautiously advanced towards the place where we had been told that the cave lay.

When the sun came up we spotted Gilhast's sentry right away. As the warm light struck a wall of rock some two hundred yards ahead of us the man's whole head and shoulders became clearly outlined in front of it. Keig examined the lie of the land and then quietly sent off two of our party, one to the right, one to the left, to discover if this was Gilhast's only guard.

Big Pat Boddaugh let out a snort as they left.

'But they may be starting on the little fella again at any moment up in the cave,' he muttered. 'He's a funny sort, I know, but you get used to people when you've been about with 'em long enough.'

'We won't do Crowe any good by being seen before we get to him,' Keig replied grimly.

And after that there were no more comments.

Eventually our two scouts came back and each reported that there was no sign at all of any other sentries. Keig glanced up at the head-and-shoulders figure outlined

against the grey of the rock which apparently rose up some ten yards to the rear.

‘Wait here,’ he said to the rest of us.

He left us at a crouching lope hidden from above by the fold of ground where we waited. Shortly after he had gone Gilhast’s guard lit a cigarette.

‘He thieved it somewhere, I bet,’ Pat Boddaugh exclaimed furiously.

Cigarettes, like anything else imported, were very hard to come by in the island by then.

We lay on our stomachs down among the dew-wet bracken and looked up towards the smoking sentry. Nothing happened for something over five minutes. But then I saw Keig. He appeared suddenly as a figure thrown on a screen between the seated man and the grey rock-face behind him. The sun on the blade of his long-handled axe sent a bright glitter down towards us.

It took Keig two minutes to get near enough to the sentry. And then the axe rose swiftly and descended. The man’s head and shoulders disappeared from view.

We saw Keig look downwards. And next—the action was so clear there could be no mistaking it—he put his foot on the stub of the cigarette and ground it thoroughly out.

After that he beckoned us forward.

Gilhast’s hiding-place was not hard to discover: a wide black cave-mouth splitting the middle of the gorse thicket on a somewhat sheltered, steeply sloping sector of the mountainside. We crept towards it, all nine of us moving one step at a time so as not to set off any little showers of debris on the stony ground, and as we did so the sound of voices from somewhere inside became spasmodically audible.

Was Francis Crowe’s one of them? We strained to hear.

And then suddenly his familiar fluty tones came to us loud and clear.

‘No, I have not changed my mind this morning. I shall only repeat the terms of Mr Keig’s request: either you should confine yourself to offensive measures against—’

‘Mr Keig? Mr Keig? Who the hell does he think he is?’

The voice that broke in on Francis Crowe’s over-solemn rendering of Keig’s message was, for all its venom, oddly slow and heavy. There could be little doubt it belonged to Gilhast himself. And now Crowe replied to him.

‘Mr Keig, as I explained last night, is the leader of the forces opposed to Mr Mylchraine.’

‘That’s a lie,’ came the dull voice of Gilhast again. ‘Calo’s head of the rebels, everyone knows that.’

‘I cannot say what Mr Calo is doing to support the cause,’ Crowe answered with a lofty dignity I later treasured the memory of. ‘But I can assure you Mr Keig is the person who landed on the island more than a year ago and has fought Mr Mylchraine ever since.’

‘He has, has he?’ Gilhast replied leadenly. ‘And I suppose no one else ever bested a Keeper only him?’

‘I am sure I have no knowledge what others may have done—’

‘But you knock down every Keeper you set eyes on, do you, you little runt? Well, let’s see how tough you are.’

And following the slow words there was a pause and then the sound of what I took to be a fist smacking heavily into Crowe’s face.

Pat Boddaugh started forward. But Keig barred his way with his axe held out. He looked round swiftly and gestured the rest of us further into the cave-mouth ready for one single rush inside.

‘Untie me at once,’ we heard Crowe say, after a quarter minute of silence, unpleasant silence.

He was speaking with some difficulty, and I imagined blood filling his mouth. I looked across at Keig. Surely we could go in now?

‘I shall report this to Mr Keig,’ came Crowe’s voice again. ‘You needn’t think I’ll overlook it.’

‘You will, will you? You little—’

But Keig had given us his signal. We were deep into the cave in two seconds.

There were a dozen of them inside the cave, some still lying half-asleep, others sitting or standing round Francis Crowe where he was tied upright to one of the gleaming wet rock walls. A single hurricane lamp sploshed golden light and huge soft shadows imPartially over the whole scene.

We were into them all, lashing out with revolver butts, before they knew what was happening. But Gilhast himself—there could be no doubting which he was, a great hulk of a fellow, face all pointing forwards to the nose—happened unluckily to be protected from our first rush by one of his men so that Pat Boddaugh, diving for him, had to deal with the other first. In the five or ten seconds which this took Gilhast plunged for the cave-mouth, snouted head down, legs outspread, a shotgun clutched at the end of one extended arm, like a great squealing bear.

Boddaugh was after him in a moment. But none of the rest of us was free to follow.

It was, I suppose, as much as a full minute before I found to my considerable surprise, that I had laid out flat the man I had set on. I got to my feet and looked round. Keig too, I saw, was heaving himself off another prostrate bandit further towards the back of the wild chaos of the cavern.

‘Get after Gilhast, quick,’ he shouted across to me.

I headed for the cave-mouth with Keig, scrambling over still struggling bodies, hurrying to join me.

It was just as he emerged beside me into the now sparkling daylight that the shot cracked out. It came from somewhere up on the mountainside above us, and by the sound of it from a shotgun. We both turned and began climbing on all fours up the steep slope of the gorse thicket. Boddaugh had been armed with a pistol only.

We reached the top of the thicket, hands and faces scratched red by the gorse, at about the same moment. Ahead of us lay a more gently inclined area of dark reedy grass stretching away to a scatter of boulders about sixty or seventy yards distant.

Pat Boddaugh was coming towards us over the reeds. He had an odd look of being almost incapably drunk, lumbering along, his big body bent forwards and swaying. He stopped, tugged off his woollen cap, held it for a moment and then let it fall beside him. After a second or so, apparently pausing to consider, he resumed his staggering march towards us. His face seemed to be hidden by some heavy shadow, only, although the sun was shining now pale and clear, there was nothing in that dark stretch of tall grass in front of us to over-shadow him.

‘Pat,’ I shouted, suddenly seized with sharp unfocused fears.

‘Michael? Michael?’ he called out bewilderedly. ‘Where are you? I can’t see. Where am I?’

He waved his hands round about him like a child playing blind-man’s-buff.

Keig and I ran up to him. We saw then that the shadow on his face was blood, blood welling from his nose and cheeks and running all down his chin. A horrible snorting noise came from somewhere inside his head.

I acknowledged to myself now what I had not been willing to admit in the few seconds before: Pat had been shot in the face at close range.

Even as I grabbed his arm the blood, which had been bubbling from nostrils and mouth, abruptly seemed to cease to flow. The weight of his big body suddenly doubled in my grasp. For some seconds Keig and I supported him, one on either side, and then at the same moment we lowered him to the ground.

‘Run now,’ Keig grated out.

He turned, put his head down and began pelting hard forwards to the distant scatter of rocks. I followed.

Thoughts and half-thoughts came and went in my mind as I plunged through the boggy dark grass. Pat, should we leave him? Gilhast is just ahead somewhere. Pat must be dead: the blood proved it, stopping like that. At any moment he may fire again. Cover? Is there any cover?

There was cover. We had reached the near edge of the rock-cluttered area. I saw Keig fling himself down and I almost fell on my face not far from him. Ideally I should have chosen a spot further away, I knew, but I could not have stayed on my feet a moment longer with the thought of the terrible thing that had just happened to Pat so vividly in my mind.

I lay there on the wet ground, panting hard.

Yes, I thought, Gilhast must still be somewhere among these boulders too, perhaps only twenty yards away. We’d have seen him for sure if he’d run on.

I began to get my breath back and started to think more constructively. Neither Keig nor I with only a pair of revolvers between us had a weapon to match the shotgun Gilhast had taken with him from the cave. But surely before too long more of our party would join us. On the other hand,

the mountainside ahead provided plenty of cover. The boulders lay close to each other and it would not be hard to creep and dodge from one to another and slowly get well away. Perhaps this was what Gilhast was doing at this very moment, and given enough time he could easily escape altogether.

I brought my pistol up close to my face and gave it a thorough lookover. It seemed none the worse for having been bashed so hard on the skull of the man I had knocked out in the cave. I slipped off the safety-catch and very cautiously heaved myself up on one elbow and peered over the flat rock in front of me.

The sharp crack of a shotgun that I had tensed myself to hear did not come. I settled myself a little more comfortably and began, methodically as I could, to scan the boulders ahead. I could see nothing.

I was just about to say this to Keig, still lying flat there three or four yards away at the other end of the rock, when from beside a tall upstanding boulder, oval in shape and with a fringe of grass on the top like ragged hair on a head, I caught a sudden yellow-red flare and almost immediately heard the sound of a shot and the whistle just overhead of heavy pellets well bunched together.

I flattened myself to the wet ground as if by squeezing into it I could gain more protection.

No other shot came. I did not dare look over the rock again. But I decided to discuss the situation with Keig.

‘At least I know where he is now,’ I said to him quietly.

He made no reply, and as his face was turned away from me I thought that perhaps he had not heard.

‘Keig,’ I called, a little more loudly than before.

Again he said nothing.

Wild panicking fear swept through me that he had been somehow killed. But he could not have been: there had been no shots other than the one, and he had been flat as flat behind the rock when Gilhast had fired that.

‘Keig,’ I called again, sharply and urgently.

There was still no answer, though I thought I saw some movement in those broad shoulders of his.

For several seconds I simply lay where I was, baffled into a temporary paralysis.

Then I began shifting over towards him. I reached him quickly enough and put a hand on his back.

His shoulders were quivering. Quivering uncontrollably. And I saw then that his hands were clutching ferociously at the grass and earth beside him.

‘Keig,’ I said, without thinking, ‘what is it?’

He jerked his head round to look at me then.

‘Are you hurt?’ I asked.

But before the words were half out I had realized that I was looking at the face of a totally frightened man.

‘No,’ he said, ‘not hurt at all.’

He produced a laugh, a sort of choked grunt.

‘I suppose you never thought I’d be scared,’ he said. ‘I suppose you thought the sight of something like Boddaugh’s face there would never do anything to me at all.’

I had not thought he could be scared, of course. I had expected to be frightened myself and very often was, and I always did my best to hide it knowing that it was a not very effective best. But Keig? That inexpressive face, could it often have been concealing feelings like mine all this time?

I felt a rush of pity, pure pity.

'I'll keep a watch on Gilhast,' I said. 'Lie here quietly. The others'll be out soon. We'll get him.'

'He'll be beyond us inside five minutes more,' Keig answered.

I could hear the sound of despair in every syllable.

Then, beside me on the wet slimy earth, I saw his right hand slowly releasing its grip on the grasses. It was being forced to relax. And when at last it was lying quite flat, palm down, Keig spoke again.

'Get round to the left there,' he said in a curious sort of hollow voice. 'Keep down but go as quick as you can. And come at him from behind. Don't shoot till you're well there. Go now.'

'And you?' I said.

'I'll see he doesn't move from where he is,' Keig answered.

He reached down for the revolver at his belt. I was torn in two ways. Half of me wanted to say to Keig that I was not going to go. Half of me knew that if Gilhast was not to escape, leaving us with the mangled body of Pat Boddaugh, then he had to be stopped at once.

'Quick, man.'

Keig's bark, or rather his forced imitation of his usual bark, sent me on my way, knees and elbows working hard scuttering along the low shelf of grey lichen-spattered rock we had been hiding behind, round to where there was a fold in the ground and the possibility of getting behind the tall grass-headed boulder where Gilhast lurked.

I should think it took me in fact something over ten minutes before I had worked my way round to the spot from which I caught my first glimpse of the brigand. During that period he had fired three shots. Each time I had frozen stiff,

thinking of Keig and the terrible effect the swishing whistle of the heavy pellets must be having on his mind racked as it was with the vision of Pat Boddaugh's mutilated face. And after each shot I had more than half expected, too, to hear Gilhast, somewhere out of sight from me, utter some thick cry of triumph at having scored a hit.

But the sound of the shot died away on each occasion and nothing followed, and I began once more my laborious approach, desperate to hurry, determined to make no sound that would give away my presence and make Keig's vigil worthless after all.

And in the end that is just what I did do. Looking back afterwards, I recognized that the incident was only debatably my fault. But at the time, just after I had got Gilhast in view and had begun creeping to within revolver range, when I accidentally sent that one loose piece of flat stone clattering down the noisy sloping rock surface, I cursed myself as bitterly as if I had shot Keig with my own hands.

I say I cursed myself, but that was a little later. At the instant the flat stone made its fiendishly noisy descent all I thought of was flinging myself down and rolling over and over to avoid the whole fusillade of shots which Gilhast began to loose off at me. Two and two they came from his double-barrelled gun, with only the shortest of pauses for reloading between each quick double crack.

I do not know what made the man shoot so furiously at me when earlier he had been content to crouch in the cover of his tall tufty-headed boulder and shoot only when he saw something move. Perhaps he had counted on never being outflanked and the sudden sound from behind had sent him into a panic. But whatever the reason he must have fired eighteen or twenty shots while I lay in comparative safety in a cranny between two rock slabs and cursed myself for

messing things up at the one time when Keig had really needed help.

Then the shots stopped. I lay for half a minute or more expecting the next pair at any second, but when they still failed to materialize I slowly raised my head.

An extraordinary sight met my eyes. There below me in the shadow of the big ungainly grass-crowned boulder a savage wrestling bout was taking place. A wrestling bout between Gilhast and Keig.

What exactly had happened I could not work out, though it was clear that while Gilhast's attention had been directed towards me Keig must have come up in silence among the broken rocks at the other side of the big boulder. He had evidently needed to get very close before getting Gilhast in sight and at the last moment the brigand had swung round. He had not succeeded in shooting, that was plain. The double-barrelled gun lay under the wrestlers' feet. But equally Gilhast had contrived to prevent Keig using his revolver when he had lost his own weapon. He had succeeded in getting him in a great bear-hug with Keig's gun-arm pinioned.

I went bounding down towards the two of them as they stood swaying and heaving, each trying to throw the other. Three or four yards away I stopped. I had my own revolver in my hand and once more I slipped off the safety-catch. But I did not dare shoot. The two of them were so closely locked together and so apt every few seconds suddenly to switch positions as they heaved and strained that I could not be certain of hitting one and not the other.

And besides, I felt somehow that perhaps I ought to stay a mere spectator to the fight, that it was a man-to-man encounter in which I should leave Keig to beat his opponent and regain thereby the confidence that he had so unexpectedly showed himself bereft of back under Gilhast's

fire. And I did not doubt, well matched though the pair of them were, with the bear-like Gilhast probably the only man I ever saw in the island as physically strong as Keig, that it would be Keig who was the victor.

For minute after minute the silent struggle went on, with Keig's arm still jammed between the two straining bodies. Every now and again there would come the sudden flurry of movement, a whirl of stamping legs and then a new locked stance. I suppose both men must, with these various changes of position, have realized that I was there watching them, and I hoped Keig would feel encouraged and perhaps Gilhast would experience an uneasiness that would just undo him.

But I was quite unprepared for the effect my presence did actually have.

It all happened within five seconds. The two big men, Keig the shorter but barrel broad, Gilhast a good six foot six in height and with an immense reach in his arms, swayed and wrestled there beside the tall head-shaped rock with its absurd fringe of grass hair, their faces pouring sweat and no sound coming from them beyond the occasional grunt of effort. And then suddenly Keig let himself be lifted clean off the ground. Gilhast gave a short 'Ha' of triumph and swinging round like a hammer-tosser at last flung Keig away from him. As he did so the disputed revolver clattered on to a rocky surface a couple of yards distant. Gilhast had only to dart forward and seize it.

But as Keig had been released from his grasp he had shouted. Only three words. Yet utterly effective.

'Shoot, Quine, shoot.'

The sound had galvanized me. I scarcely needed to raise my pistol I was so near. I tugged at the trigger abominably, but I was too close to miss. Gilhast's bear-like figure, which had already launched itself forward on to Keig's gun, jerked

spasmodically and, as I fired a second shot, his knees buckled and he fell writhing sideways.

I stood looking down at him, the first man that to my certain knowledge I had actually killed. And then I turned to Keig.

‘You let him throw you deliberately,’ I said, like an accusing schoolboy.

‘Aye,’ he answered. ‘He had to be finished, and that was the best way.’

4

So we made our way back to our headquarters in the beechwood, leaving the body of Pat Boddaugh buried under a thin layer of rocks up on the mountainside near Gilhast's cave. For all the decisive way Gilhast had been dealt with, we were a weary and depressed group as we picked our way through the wolds on our scratch collection of horses. A piece of encouraging news was to greet us on our arrival, but without its stimulus nothing but black thoughts occupied us.

My thoughts were perhaps blacker than anyone's since in the glimpse I had had of the inner Keig I had more ground than the others for disquiet.

I had seen Keig afraid. Here was a new consideration in our whole struggle. If in some crisis ahead he was going to be struck into similar inaction again, what desperate consequences might it not have on our fortunes, depending as they did so much on him? And then a yet worse thought came to me. Though none of us ever exactly boasted of being overcome at times by sheer fright, we all knew, I think, that in varying degrees each of us had been good and scared. But Keig, by his nature, was barred from this unspoken freemasonry. What effect was that having on a mind already bent on a lonely voyage of its own?

How fervently I wished at that moment that, after his sharp victory over Gilhast, Keig had wandered apart from the rest of us as he had done in the old days and indulged in one of those extraordinary axe displays. And to think I had

looked on them as a sign of a mind becoming too centred on its own affairs. I would have given almost anything now to have had that reassurance that Keig was still human enough to experience mere vanity.

But what went on behind that broad inexpressive face was now once more locked up from me. Keig, jogging along by my side on the sturdiest of our horses, a great shaggy-hooved plough animal, said not a word.

I tried to put myself in a better frame of mind with a sober summing-up of what we had achieved in the twelve hours since we had set out on our punitive expedition. First, Francis Crowe had been rescued. And then, we had dealt firmly and quickly with a decided menace. If the people of the wolds, never perfectly open or friendly to us, were to be made to realize that there was a difference between those who wore our orange-red wool cap and the miscellaneous outlaws who were equally the Keepers' enemies, then we could hardly have found a better way of demonstrating it. The news of what had happened to Gilhast, as well known as any of the brigands, would spread fast enough. I would see to that myself. And this was almost certain to curb any other lawless men.

Only Keig and Calo would then be left fighting Mylchraine.

My hard-won optimism melted. Calo. Calo, ensconced in Lesneven. There was a very different proposition from Gilhast. The latter Keig had dealt with easily enough simply by superior strength and cunning. But these would not even scratch Calo. And the only confrontation we had had with him so far, our humbling visit to that big house of his, did not auger well for any other approach. Was Keig going to have to accept him then, acknowledge him as leader of the fight against Mylchraine, a man little better than Mylchraine himself? It looked as if it might be so.

No sooner had we arrived back in our strip of secure beech-wood, however, than we were told that Calo and his troopers were no longer in Lesneven. They had left, indeed, as dusk fell the night before. They were, I saw looking back, sensible to have done so: they could never have held a town of something like fifty thousand people with just eighty men, especially as by no means all its inhabitants were opposed to Mylchraine. Whiskey and witchcraft saw to that.

And though, I suppose, those of us round Keig ought to have regretted that Mylchraine now had his capital intact again, I do not think there was a single one of us who was not cheered by the news that Calo had not been so clever after all.

Yet during the month that followed, a long idyllic September with the branches of the trees drooping low under their undisturbed burden of summer dust and the little tents of stooked corn gradually spreading across the cut fields one by one, the brown-jacketed troopers went on scooping up their share of victories. And each such item, on Keig's express instructions, I would dutifully include in my news-sheet in the hope that we were gradually instilling into the slow and stubborn people of the wolds the idea that Mylchraine's days were numbered.

But in fact privately I was beginning to harbour doubts myself about just how numbered those days might be. Calo and his men were ranging here and there with something like impunity, true. But were they ever really going to capture and hold Lesneven? It was almost certainly a task well beyond their strength.

And we ourselves were doing no better. With each passing week it became clearer and clearer that Lesneven was not going to be taken without much heavier arms than we possessed. Keig had begun once more to make requests for, not only anti-tank weapons, but for field-guns to Peter

Cormode—never slow to inform us about the large sums that were coming in from Americans impressed by the exploits of Marcus Calo, ‘last of the cavalrymen’—but there was little sign in the endlessly tapped Morse messages from Dublin that Cormode had much intention of complying.

And then one day I had a little piece of luck which was to make an altogether disproportionate difference to our fortunes.

We had moved into yet another headquarters—still not being beyond the reach of a well-planned attack, though this was the most southerly point we had yet occupied.

We had picked a hawking-lodge on the edge of the mountains and we had waited to make use of it till its owner, obviously a stubborn adherent of things as they used to be, had finished his customary month’s hawking there. Our scouts had watched him day by day, and at last one afternoon he had gone.

As we forced the door of the little granite building—locked so carefully not an hour before—and walked in, my small stroke of luck came. There lying on the bare table of the empty living-room was a scatter of newish-looking magazines. I scooped them up. It had been months and months since I had read anything at all and, though these did not look exactly promising as reading-matter, being mostly the classier kind of huntin’, shootin’ and fishin’ periodical, I thought they might all the same while away a few hours of the long waiting that was the form our war so often took at this time, waiting to hear whether an ambush had been successful, waiting while a laborious reconnaissance was conducted, waiting for the enemy to make an expected counter-move this way or that.

I did not succeed in getting a look at my booty for a couple of hours. There was a certain amount of settling in to be done and a new edition of my news-sheet to be messily

and purply reproduced to the extent of fifty copies, destined to go grubbily from hand to hand round the whole island filling some of the more obvious gaps in the heavy columns of the *Oceana Messenger* and gradually, we hoped, re-educating the people Mylchraine kept ignorant.

But when at last I idly opened the first of my pile of treasure trove—they still had about them just a little of that wonderful magaziney smell—the very first thing my eye alighted on was a picture taken at some Hunt Ball some six weeks earlier in distant England. And there, large as life, though not mentioned in the caption's evocative prose about 'the Hon. Mrs That sharing a joke with Lord This at Mrs T'Other's table at...', there was the likeness of none other than Marcus Calo himself.

I sat on the bare bedstead in the room I had been working in and looked and looked in delighted amazement. So the last of the cavalrymen had been leading his all-conquering troopers from the safety of the English hunting countryside from shortly after the day of his famous entry into Lesneven.

I jumped up and ran down to Keig. I felt he should be first to share the big joke.

Rough humour, however, proved to be far from Keig's reaction to my little piece of information. He took the folded-back magazine from me and studied the picture and its curious caption with just the same intentness I had once seen him giving to the writings of Karl von Clausewitz in the grey public library in Pearse Street, Dublin.

Then he pronounced his verdict.

'So that's the end of Marcus Calo. I never thought he'd last.'

And it was only then that I saw it, saw beyond what I had thought of as a good blackish joke to the truth of the matter: that Keig had won his contest against Calo. He had won it not in the dramatic manner he had dealt with Gilhast, but by pitting his own endurance in the long struggle with our truly formidable enemy against the flashier qualities of the gambling estate-owner. The stronger man had carried it off.

And nor was this my only miscalculation.

‘Go and find Crowe,’ Keig said sharply now. ‘Tell him he’s to get that wireless of his working at once. He’s to get on to Cormode and tell him what this book is and the date of it and where to look for the picture.’

He thrust the magazine—the ‘book’ as he had called it—back into my hands.

‘You know,’ he went on, ‘I’ve often suspected Cormode’s been thinking of sending guns to Calo. This’ll put a stop to that.’

‘It certainly will,’ I said with relish.

‘And then,’ Keig continued, ignoring my intervention, ‘tell Crowe to pack up his set and be ready to move in an hour.’

‘To move? But we’ve only just—’

‘We’re going down to Calo’s. If he’s been gone out of the island these six weeks, those men of his’ll be all through-others. And should Mylchraine get to find that out any time, he’ll be down into them in five minutes.’

So it was just like that that we set out something over an hour later, as the earlier dusk of September was deepening into night, to visit once again Calo’s big house in the far south of the island.

But this time we went by motor-cycle, a small column of us on commandeered machines, recklessly squandering what little petrol we had been able to lay our hands on and

even, on Keig's unexpected orders, using lights and keeping to the main roads.

It was an almost dream-like sensation as the countryside went hurtling by in the blaze of our headlamps, drystone walls, hedges at their full autumnal height, the stumps of the many felled oaks constantly showing up in great white rounds. And, adding to the oddness, not a soul challenged us, not a Keeper on his motor-cycle, not a scout-car.

It was only when we were something over half-way that the one incident that marked the journey occurred. It happened with startling abruptness.

We were riding bunched together along a straight stretch and in the massed light of all our headlamps we saw well ahead that the road took a right-angled turn and that a field-gate lay in our direct path. Then Keig on the leading machine suddenly waved his arm up and down and brought us to a sharp halt.

My just-acquired motor-cycling skill vanished. But I did succeed in bringing my machine to a stop before I had much overshot Keig. And it was because I was some way in advance of the others that I saw clearly why we had halted.

In the field on the far side of the gate, about twenty yards inwards from the road there was a store dump. The sight was not altogether unusual since in the early days of the fighting the Keepers had often stored supplies of various sorts, and even arms, in such places as this before we had taught them better. But a dump of this sort nowadays was a little out of the ordinary. And there was something a bit different too about the metal canisters it appeared to consist of.

And then I got it. Napalm. Here, right in front of us were the long black canisters that made up perhaps the whole of Mylchraine's hoard of napalm. Keig's reactions, I thought,

must be even sharper than I had believed they were for him to have spotted this so quickly.

Thanks to taking this main-road route which none of us had ever ventured on before, it seemed we had hit on the very place where Mylchraine had stored his napalm since shortly before Calo had brought into play his famous secretly acquired field-gun and had in one blow destroyed his enemy's air force and all the superiority that it gave.

And, it came to me then, that this very hoard might well be brought into use again before long, if Calo's troopers ceased to be an effective fighting force. It can only have been their presence in the island, ranging up and down, that had after all deterred Mylchraine from getting hold of another small fleet of aircraft and setting up a new airfield with all the terrible dominance which that would give him once again.

I sat astride my still throbbing motor-cycle and peered at the solid wall of black canisters in the field with the palpitating beams of our headlights playing on them, while the autumn night-scents of the surrounding country, the dry odour of cut corn and the tart sweetness of ripening blackberries and over-softened damsons in the hedges beside me gradually mingled with the hot smell of my engine.

Could we destroy the foul stuff at this moment? No doubt it would burn all right and though it might be pretty difficult to ignite, that should not prove an insuperable obstacle.

'Who's there? Who's there, I say?'

The voice came suddenly from a thicket not far from the gate. It sent the hair pricking on my scalp. There was bound to be a gun behind it.

'Get away,' Keig called, low and urgent. 'Get away quick.'

The throbbing engine of his motor-cycle roared up and, with its back-wheel scuttering the loose surface of the road from underneath it, he swirled round and with gradually gathering speed made off into the dark.

I gathered my wits about me, twisted the throttle-grip of my own machine hard and bucked suddenly forward. I flung my weight sideways, nearly came off but succeeded somehow in following Keig's rapidly disappearing rear-light. The others, I realized, were roaring off all round me.

I do not know, in all the din we made, whether that slow-witted sentry we had eventually aroused, did ever fire a shot at us. He must have been a good deal puzzled by the sudden appearance of so many noisy motor-cycles in the late evening quiet, and if he ever did get round to firing, as he ought to have done, his shots went so wide that none of us were ever aware of them.

We bucketed on at, if anything, an even faster rate, myself anxiously wondering whether that sentry was even now telling his superiors about us? Did he have a field-telephone in some guard-hut among those bushes? Would the scout-cars come out hunting us after all?

But it still seemed that they would not. We rode on and on, with still nothing and no one trying to stop us till we reached Calo's big house, roared up its unblemished drive, burst unceremoniously in and were directed by the scared butler, his striped full-sail waistcoat all unbuttoned, to the Overseer's office.

A light was shining through its glass door at the end of a long corridor, and as the noise of our tramping feet echoed from the high ceiling above the outline of a tall figure could be seen advancing as if to come out and then retreating hurriedly.

Keig turned the door-knob and entered the room.

Faragher, the sombre-looking Overseer, was standing beside the fireplace of the large dark-furnished office. In his hands he held a shotgun, pointed towards us at waist height.

‘Mr Faragher,’ Keig said, ‘I suppose you’re the one Calo left in charge?’

‘I am,’ Faragher replied, still standing with the shotgun pointing unmovingly towards us and a leaning row of big black-bound account books running all along the mantelpiece behind his head.

His man-in-the-moon face was noticeably weary, I saw, with dark hollows under the eyes, cutting lines drawn from cheekbones to chin and a grey pallor making his jutting black eyebrows look like a pair of party joke-pieces stuck on and forgotten about.

‘I said I’d do it,’ he went on, hardly seeming to realize whom he was talking to. ‘And, by God, I’ll go through with it till I hear differently.’

‘You’ll not hear from Calo,’ Keig said brutally. ‘He’s a sight too busy going to dances and that away in England.’

Now Faragher did seem to take in once more whom he was talking to.

‘England?’ he said with an uncontrollable jump in his voice. ‘How do you know Mr Calo’s in England? For God’s sake, that’s meant to be a secret between him and me, though I don’t know how the hell I’m expected to keep it so with the weeks going by and the weeks going by.’

‘You can tell the whole world now,’ Keig answered. ‘And if you don’t we will. Calo’s finished in Oceana, and I’ve come to pick up the pieces.’

‘You’ve what—’

Faragher took a step forward and I thought the shotgun in his hands was going to blaze out at any instant.

And then the tip of the barrel drooped a little.

‘How the hell can I be expected to go on like this?’ Faragher said, scarcely attempting to check the whine in his tone. ‘I’ve kept this estate the best run in the island for fifteen years, but I can’t add fighting a war to it all now.’

‘No, you can’t,’ Keig said, walking briskly across to a big map-cluttered table that stood against one wall of the room. ‘So just you tell me as quick as you can where these men of Calo’s are and what they’re meant to be doing.’

‘Well, damn him,’ Faragher replied. ‘Damn him, that’s all.’

And he turned wearily, broke open the shotgun, flicked a cartridge from the breech, placed it with trembling fingers on the mantelpiece in front of the lop-sided account books, dropped the gun into a corner and came over to the big square table.

And in this way Keig, who experienced fear, I knew, at facing shotgun fire, became commander-in-chief of all the forces opposed to Mylchraine.

But the surprises of that day were not yet over. Keig and the rest of us had been working for about an hour with Faragher, learning all he had to tell us about the location of Calo’s men and their organization, when Francis Crowe, who had just succeeded in getting in touch with Dublin on his battered old transmitter, let out an indignant gasp from down on the floor in the corner where he was kneeling, fat bottom up, tapping earnestly away at his black-knobbed Morse key.

‘They’re interrupting,’ he said furiously. ‘They really ought to know better. It’s the first rule—’

‘What are they saying?’ Keig broke in.

Crowe bent forward again in silence and gave his full attention to the dots and dashes as they came to him, noting them down letter by letter with his pencil, beautifully sharpened even in these circumstances. One by one the neat capitals spelled it out.

‘URGENT. REVOLUTIONARY COUNCIL TO KEIG. SIX, REPEAT SIX, THREE POINT SEVEN HOWITZERS ALREADY DESPATCHED. POSSIBLY ARRIVED CALOESTOWN ABOUT NOON. ACKNOWLEDGE URGENTLY. ENDS.’

‘Caloestown,’ I said, when with the word ENDS I dared to speak. ‘You know what that means? Those are howitzers intended for Calo. Cormode’s gone and—’

‘Shut up,’ Keig said.

He stooped over Francis Crowe still kneeling beside the Morse key.

‘Send an acknowledgement,’ he said.

‘Right! Anything else?’

‘No. We’re going to Caloestown directly. If those guns have come and no one’s told Faragher here, then there’s likely some dirty business going on.’

He straightened up and turned to Calo’s sombre Overseer, who at once began protesting that he would have told us of the prospect of acquiring howitzers if he had any idea at all that it existed. But Keig cut him short.

‘Petrol,’ he said abruptly. ‘Have you got petrol to hand? I doubt if there’s much left in our tanks by now.’

‘Oh, we’ve petrol,’ Faragher answered. ‘Mr Calo preferred a horse to his motor-car, but he always saw to it that he could go where he liked as he liked. We’ve petrol in plenty.’

‘Good, then show us where you keep it,’ Keig said.

But half way across to the door he checked himself.

‘No. Better than that. Is this motor-car of Calo’s a big one?’

‘It’s a Bentley,’ Faragher replied with a touch of venom, evidently gaining some pleasure now from seeing Calo’s possessions despoiled.

‘And that’s big?’ Keig asked.

‘It’s big and one of the best,’ I put in with a smile.

Keig turned to me sharply.

‘You know how to drive a motor?’ he snapped out.

‘Yes. Yes, certainly.’

‘Then you’ll get us to Caloestown just as fast as you can. Faragher, you tell us the quickest way.’

Within five minutes from that moment we had all piled into Calo’s Bentley, a pre-1939 model with a hood that lowered elaborately, and I was driving as fast as I knew how towards Caloestown some ten miles away. And soon I saw the sky ahead palely glowing.

The lights of the port, I thought.

And then I thought ‘What nonsense, at this time of night there’ll hardly be a single lamp lit in the whole of a little place like this.’

But when, half a minute later, we topped the crest of the next hill I saw just why the pale glow was there.

We had a view right down into the little port with the houses lying in a black mass round the shining octagonal shape of the water of the harbour. And all along the quayside between the houses and the water there were lights. Lights, and the unmistakable shapes of scout-cars. The Keepers’ scout-cars. I counted them rapidly. There were twenty of them, no less. Twenty scout-cars and beside them, now clearly to be identified, six canvas-shrouded shapes. Six 3.7-inch howitzers, beyond doubt.

With weapons such as these in Mylchraine's hands, I saw in one sickening dazzle of foresight, our only hope of ever gaining victory would be by matching them with an equal force. And this would elevate the whole struggle within the shortest of periods to an altogether new plane. It would become an affair for big guns. Literally.

Part Five

1

Keig was to produce a counterstroke which in some measure offset the loss of the weapons that should have ended the struggle for us. But at the time we realized we had lost them only the blackest thoughts prevailed. It had needed little working-out to see that, thanks to the terrible bungle that had occurred—we learnt later that the sharp gun-running captain of the freighter realizing there had been a slip-up had contrived to wireless Lesneven and sell his whole cargo to Mylchraine—the odds against us had worsened almost as badly and as abruptly as when the napalm-dropping planes had first appeared.

Mylchraine with these howitzers to defend Lesneven could use all his scout-cars to gain command of an area of countryside big enough for another airstrip, and then he could buy planes again and put us back where we had been the winter before.

In the event it proved these darkest prognostications were not justified. Curiously, the capture of the guns caused Mylchraine to make a mistake much like that he had made after our first victory more than two years before when he had withdrawn from the whole north unable to believe that a body of men who could take such a toll of his Keepers was not a great deal more numerous than we then were. Now, finding we had been on the point of obtaining a crushing superiority, he retreated in an almost hysterical panic to concentrate on Lesneven, Portharnel and the railway between them. The scout-cars, far from harassing us more, were actually embedded in the fortified chain he now set up

round his heartland and became nothing more than armour-plated pillboxes. More practised commanders have made errors of timidity no less serious, but this action almost undoubtedly cost Mylchraine a few decisive weeks in which he might have finished the war.

As it was, we caught up in the arms race. The bluntly scathing message Keig sent to Cormode about the lost howitzers—I almost felt sorry for that clever old fence-sitter—was immediately effective. By return there came a brief assurance that a matching number of guns would be purchased at once, signed simply ‘Cormode’.

Part of Mylchraine’s slowness to take advantage of his luckily gained superiority must too have come from Keig’s counterstroke. This was quite simply the destruction that very night of the secret napalm dump. Mylchraine might have been able to buy more planes quickly, but getting more of this death-dealing stuff would have required a good deal of time.

And all that we did was to drive there and then in Calo’s Bentley straight back to where we had discovered the dump. We found it guarded by only three men sitting in their hut playing cards. They knew not a thing until Steven Dowan and a couple of the others were standing over them with pistols pointing at their heads while the rest of us tackled the napalm.

The pod-like canisters appeared in the darkness to be completely sealed, but Keig took his axe to one and with a resounding blow split the metal wide. Then he set alight a piece of petrol-soaked rag I had brought from the Bentley and tossed it on the thick fluid puddling out. It went up with a dense roar of orange flame mounting in thick triangles and turning within moments to oily smoke.

Once more I saw the sight that had haunted me in dreams during all the past year, Jack Ascough standing on

that pillar of uncut rock in the slate quarry, the thin cone of flame that fastened on him, the rifle with which he had punily tried to bring down the circling plane falling away from him like a separate stick of gluey fire. In spite of the heat from the fast-igniting stack of canisters I shivered.

But as we drove back to Calo's house at every mile of the way there came from behind us, glinting on the deep-polished wood-work of the Bentley's fascia, a glow of dark fire.

That glowing fire proved a good omen: in the days that followed our fortunes bettered like fast-spreading flames. Yet it was an improvement that was earned. Keig worked with an energy comparable only with the way he had once tackled the back-breaking granite blocks of the lighter when he had constructed that hiding-place for the two of us. Now, though, he was tackling not stone blocks but the problems of a staff-officer in integrating Calo's army with our own and in bringing all our forces to bear against Mylchraine. He succeeded by unflagging commonsense. I saw him as seizing on each difficulty that presented itself like a tireless gorilla seizing on nut after nut—the lift to the jaw, the sharp crack, the husk spat from the meaty kernel.

Yet there was one problem area he left untackled. This was what might be called the political decision arising from our now being in possession of all but a sixth of the island. The territory needed ruling: Keig just ran it. If he saw something was wrong, he simply said it was to stop. For example, on the occasion of the first of the witch-cult festivals that came in our time, Punky Night on the last day of October, he blankly forbade any public meetings. That alone must have earned him a good measure of stony, silent enmity from the hidebound woldsmen.

However setbacks here were intangible and our military progress far outweighed them. Indeed, as the year came to an end this received what might be called the ultimate recognition: Cormode and the full Revolutionary Council announced they were coming to establish themselves alongside us.

So on Christmas Eve we found ourselves waiting on the quayside at Caloestown, with a single lamp breaking the darkness and a whip-like east wind putting down a thin hard layer of snow, as the coaster in which the Council had made the journey over slowly manoeuvred up. It was Keig and myself alone who waited. He had insisted there was no need for more of us, and I had insisted that he himself had to be there.

‘Cormode’s a pretty devious character,’ I remember saying. ‘The sooner you get an idea of what he wants the better.’

Keig had thought for a moment or two in his usual uncompromising silence. Then he had answered.

‘All right.’

A sailor at the stern of the coaster threw a rope. A local boy, about twelve he must have been, darted from the shelter of a stone bollard and caught the flying end. He wound it round the bollard with the skill of much practice—had he begun at the age of eight?—and the coaster’s engine was abruptly silenced. There was a shout or two as a second rope was sent snaking on to the snow-sprinkled quay and then a couple of deckhands casually thrust out a battered gangplank.

The wind blew with steady viciousness. We could hear it thrumming now in the little ship’s rigging.

And at last a narrow metal door opened in her superstructure to show a thin bar of warm light and one by

one a number of figures, each lugging one heavy suitcase or two, made their way out on to the deck. I recognized Cormode and others from the Dublin days—old Abraham Skillicorne, looking even at this distance unambiguously miserable, and Willine the poet.

After a pause to look about them they began to descend the gangway. I glanced at Keig.

‘Shall we go?’

He nodded and marched ahead of me over to the foot of the gangplank, his head with its close-fitting orangey cap hunched between massive shoulders. Just as Cormode stepped down on to the quay, on to Oceanan soil, he came to a halt and gave him one sharp look.

‘Hello,’ he said.

‘Hello, Mr Keig,’ Cormode replied, after an instant’s pause in which he evidently adjusted himself to an unexpected situation.

He looked round then and spoke again.

‘Can we get into shelter somewhere?’ he asked. ‘And then perhaps you can start putting me in the picture over such administrative arrangements as you have made for the Reconquered Territories.’

It was a good effort, I had to acknowledge. In face of a Keig a great deal grimmer and sharper than the man he would have remembered, the withdrawn, odd-man-out of Dublin whose long silences could well have been the result of ineradicable shyness, he had managed to speak with a convincing air of doing just what he had expected. And how would Keig answer his assumption that he was to have charge of ‘the Reconquered Territories’?

Keig replied simply by ignoring it.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘you’ll want to do what you can, and looking after things behind the fighting line would be what you’re best at, I dare say.’

‘I think I’d manage,’ Cormode answered dryly.

Keig glowered at this trace of levity.

‘There’ll be more to it than you suppose,’ he said. ‘There’s the estate-owners, you know. There’ll be trouble there one day if we don’t look out, and you could deal with people like that. And, the way of it is, I can’t spare time from putting Mylchraine down.’

Cormode let all that this implied pass with a readiness I found suspicious, and I quickly suggested that the newcomers must be tired. Plainly exhausted as they were, they were glad enough to make for their beds in the one little hotel Caloestown possessed.

I wanted urgently to talk to Keig, though I was in two minds about what to say. I had been bemused, I saw, by the speed events had happened at in the last six weeks or so, ever since I had chanced on my discovery that Calo had quit. Only when I had actually seen the Revolutionary Council on Oceanan soil had the full truth of things struck me: Cormode and the rest were not just acknowledging our military predominance, they were nothing else than harbingers of peace.

And peace implies ‘after the war’. What were we going to do after the war? It was a question none of us had asked. We had been too deeply engaged in the day-to-day realities of fighting. Yet now the question was upon us.

And it put me in a terrible dilemma. With one half of me I wanted to see the way Keig did things simply continue for ever. I might get furious over his inability to see when politics intruded—or was this not inability, but a refusal to see, a knowledge from innate commonsense that that way

madness lies?—but I knew in my heart that Keig's way was fundamentally the way of justice. Yet another half of me was in mortal terror that Keig was deParting from that way. This was the part of me that remembered, and refused to remember, Fred Quiddie's execution, dead Donald Fayrhare's unceremonious huddling away, the abrupt and forthright ending of the Hoddick villagers' comparatively innocent 'orgy' and other signs of perhaps the growth in Keig of just what he was fighting in Mylchraine. This was the side of me that feared the effect his loved Margaret's death must have had on a lonely mind.

Prey to such feelings, I was even grateful that Cormode had appeared on the scene. Yet here was the politician, the intriguer, the power-seeker, the man who had done nothing to bring Mylchraine down but wait to see which way it would go. And I had to say something about him to Keig now.

'Look,' I ventured when we were alone in the hotel bar-room, 'I think you should go more carefully with Cormode. The fellow's ambitious.'

Keig looked up from where he had sat himself on one of the time-polished oak benches.

'Cormode'll do that job well enough,' he said. 'It's what he's good for.'

'Oh yes. I've no doubt he will. He's one of nature's administrators. He'll tackle the island's troubles for you, and he'll talk the estate-owners into being sweet, I dare say. But he'll do it by making himself the boss.'

'He's no leader,' Keig answered. 'I knew that when I first set eyes on him.'

He did not refer beyond this to that first encounter with Cormode when I had shepherded him, a strange uncouth countryman, into the snug at Caveen's Bar. But I knew he must have that scene in mind and all of a sudden I decided

to grab at what small shoots of nostalgia there must be in this always resolutely forward-looking nature and face him with the question that had only a few minutes earlier presented itself to me.

‘Listen,’ I said, ‘what has it all been for? What about afterwards? What do you mean to do when we’ve beaten Mylchraine?’

But in the deep-set eyes there was not the smallest gleam of sentiment.

‘We haven’t beaten Mylchraine,’ Keig said. ‘There’ll be time enough to think about afterwards when we see him crack.’

And this was all I could get out of him. There was sense in it, I saw. We had by no means beaten Mylchraine. He had retreated, certainly. There was a prospect of victory. But Mylchraine had funds enough, and a deep-water port, to bring in new weapons. From my forgotten history-book days a vague memory of Wellington in Spain came back. Hadn’t he lain up behind the Lines of Torres Something-or-other and emerged to chase the French from the Peninsula? Perhaps old Clausewitz even had commented on this, and Keig had a justified fear that Mylchraine might prove to be a Wellington and ourselves the French.

Through all that winter, in fact, it looked as if there was something in this. It took us all our time to get our motley and half-trained forces into a position where it would be realistic to think of trying to break Mylchraine before he broke us, even though Keig did wonders. On occasion he still actually surprised me, though I thought I knew the full range of his capabilities.

Yet one February morning within a few minutes of dawn when I went to see what he had in mind for the day I found him ready and waiting, orangey cap on head, old never-relinquished axe loosely swinging.

‘We’re going to the line near Portharnel,’ he said. ‘We’ll take a bit of breakfast on the way.’

And three minutes later, just that, I was driving him in that big old Bentley through drizzling rain, in silence, the customary state of affairs when Keig had nothing that needed saying. In less than half an hour we had reached the rear areas. We went forward on foot to meet the commander of the local ‘brigade’—for such was the military term, garnered from heaven knows where, that Keig had given the bigger units into which our forces were now organized.

Keig gave the man, a bustling thirty-year-old with a full fair moustache who had come over to us from the Defence Force, a curt nod of greeting.

‘I want to look at their lines,’ he said.

‘Right you are, Mr Keig. We’d best go up this way. From the top you get a pretty good idea.’

The three of us tramped along a sunken lane, where the remains of the last snowfall lay in white streaks pockmarked by the grey of water-drips, to a point where two men with rifles huddled in a dug-out beside a field gateway.

‘This is as far as it’s safe to go,’ the commander said.

We peered carefully over a drystone wall towards the outermost edge of Mylchraine’s redoubt. An unharvested mass of oats lay all beaten down and black in the field in front of us with on its far side another wall in a pretty poor state of repair. Beyond this a similar field sloped upwards to a line of hazel-bushes, bare of leaf but with their thickly intertwined twigs forming a fairly solid mass. Just behind it could be seen the square shape of a bedded-down scout-car.

Keig turned to the commander.

‘I hear you’re not certain what else they’ve got besides the car,’ he said.

The man fingered his fluffily fair moustache.

‘Hasn’t been what you might call practical to get a close look,’ he answered.

‘Well, I’m going to find out,’ Keig said. ‘You stay here.’

He had spoken to me as well as the discomfited commander, and I was glad enough not to have been ordered nearer the enemy. That scout-car looked too well placed. I wondered too why Keig had made such a fuss about finding out about the enemy. With only two men with rifles we ourselves were hardly going to stop the Keepers if they chose to make a break-out here.

But I was given little time for such thoughts. Keig, taking one quick glance at that reliable watch he had purchased in distant Dublin, walked upright straight through the gateway into the stretch of sodden oats in front of us.

He’ll be killed, I said to myself. Keig’ll be killed. What shall we do?

I thought of running out and dragging him back. Fear would not have stopped me. But I knew that in simple fact I could not drag Keig as much as one yard if he did not want to come, and plainly he had stepped into that field under the direct gaze of the enemy with every intention of staying there.

He tramped down towards the far drystone wall, squashing the black rotting oat-stems under his heavy boots, kicking away the occasional remains of snow. There came no sound of firing: I imagine the Keepers in that well-protected scout-car were just as astonished as we were.

Keig reached the wall, laid his axe on it and stood slowly appraising the hazel copse a hundred yards away. And then the firing did begin. A short burst from an automatic weapon

stuttered out in the misty air. I saw a few birds wheel up from the bushes. I looked back to where Keig stood. He was still leaning forwards over the wall. It was impossible to see where the shots had gone.

Another burst. This time my eyes were not on the car but on Keig and I saw the bullets send chips flying from the wall a yard to his left. Slowly he turned and began squelching back over the ruined oats.

Hurry, hurry, I prayed.

The gun fired again. Its bright sparking and a shower of broken twigs from the hazel-bushes were plainly to be seen. I expected Keig to stagger and fall, but he kept walking steadily on. Another burst drew a sudden black line across a patch of snow he had just tramped over, following exactly the line of his footsteps.

They can't miss him now, I thought. Oh, why had he done this?

But they did miss. It is extraordinary how many bullets it can take, with a not Particularly skilled marksman at any range beyond point-blank, to hit a moving target. Keig marched on. The gun began firing in more continuous bursts, and then it stopped.

Jammed, I thought. And Keig within twenty yards of us.

Run, I almost shouted. Don't risk it any more. Run.

Instead he looked at his watch, and, as if he was a little early for an appointment, turned and walked along parallel to our wall. Twenty-five yards, squelch, squelch, through the messy oat-stalks, turn, twenty-five yards back.

He is going to be killed, I told myself. They'll get that gun going again and he will be killed.

2

But of course Keig was not killed. At the end of the third turn in his walk up and down he consulted his watch again and, in time for his appointment, swung off and walked back in through the gateway. As he did so one of the men in the dug-out brought up his rifle and sent shot after shot out into the field until I had to shake him to make him stop.

And, of course, Keig's action had the effect I soon realized it had been intended to have. It created for him as leader of the struggle against Mylchraine an extraordinary reputation. It made him a sort of living talisman for every man under his command.

And, remembering his moment of weakness after he had seen poor Pat Boddough's mutilated face and been unable to face Gilhast's shotgun, I was doubly delighted that his cold courage rapidly had its reward. As little as two days later, driving him on an inspection tour at the very other end of our line, I was asked repeatedly whether the exploit had actually happened, I assured everyone it had, and even embellished the tale.

I hoped I might make a repetition unnecessary, though I did not succeed. At various points in the line that swung round Mylchraine's forces in a great irregular arc during the rest of the winter and in the spring Keig repeated almost exactly the same performance. And the legend of god-like invulnerability he acquired was very necessary. It offset the sapping of morale that our lengthening list of casualties inevitably brought as with the better weather we pressed

harder and harder on the unrolling barbed wire and growing mine-sown patches of the Keepers' defences.

'Every day they're left in peace,' Keig said, 'we let them kill one more of us sometime without us being able to kill one more of them.'

So, as with advancing summer our men advanced yard by yard, Keig's talismanic effect became more and more necessary, though often I feared we might have obtained its benefits at a terrible cost in its hidden effects on Keig himself.

And we did not advance fast enough. In May we heard Mylchraine had bought tanks equipped with flame-throwing devices. First we heard he had a hundred of these monsters. Then a revised account said he had just two. But towards the end of the month a new figure came deviously from Hamburg, where the purchase we said to be being negotiated, saying that Mylchraine had offered for twelve tanks but that the talks were still uncompleted. Even that was not pleasant hearing. A squadron of twelve tanks, especially armed with this eerie, bestial device, could dominate the whole of Oceana.

Keig's immediate response was to call Cormode, who still controlled the purse-strings, to his headquarters, now established in the small town of Kermaddack almost directly west of Lesneven, where we occupied the little Assembly Room.

Cormode came alone. When he entered Keig's cell-like room at the back of the hall Keig was sitting on the only seat, a battered paint-splodged kitchen chair, and I was sitting on the folded blankets from his bed set on top of his haversack. Keig put down the board that had been across his knees, but made no attempt to get up. I rose, slightly put out by what I saw as a display of arrogance.

'Sit down,' Keig said to me, 'I'll be needing you.'

I lowered myself carefully back.

Cormode stood looking at us, seeming extraordinarily out-of-place with his shiny-elbowed blue suit and his briefcase compared with Keig's open-necked shirt, heavy mud-encrusted trousers and his long-handled axe resting casually against the side of his battered chair.

'I want more heavy guns,' Keig said to him. 'And I want them quick.'

Cormode turned and began trying to pace up and down the little room.

'I wonder,' he said, 'if you realize how crippling the cost might be.'

'Mylchraine's getting flame-throwers,' Keig replied. 'Have you ever seen a man burnt alive?'

Well, I thought, we had. We had seen poor argumentative Jack Ascough go.

Cormode came to an abrupt standstill. I guessed he was sensitive about the inactive part he had played in our affairs all along. It was shrewd of Keig to get at him there.

'Mr Keig,' he said, 'I know people have to die when a war is fought.'

Keig gave him a sharp glance.

'And someone has to order them to risk death,' he said.

It was an unexpected remark. With Keig's habitual inscrutability it was difficult to appreciate how much of a toll it took having not simply to order one attack but having to order another next day when the casualty reports were still coming in. Yet here was a glimpse of the strain. It was both reassuring and not so. Any rift in the thickening cloud-veil that hung over Keig was spirit-lifting, but I saw now too that such unremitting weight borne in loneliness could have terrible effects.

But Keig at once shook his head in an almost imperceptible gesture of casting something off and looked gloweringly at Cormode.

‘Just how much have you got in the kitty in Dublin then?’ he asked.

A little pink flush appeared on Cormode’s pallid cheeks.

‘That isn’t the sort of question that can be answered,’ he replied. ‘It’s a matter of accounting.’

‘All right, I know. You’ve got an account at the bank. Money comes in and money goes out and you can’t tell to a penny where you stand. But you must have some notion all the same. I want twenty-two more howitzers. Have you got the cash?’

‘Twenty-two, but surely that’s—’

‘I said twenty-two,’ Keig interrupted. ‘I’ve gone round those lines of theirs for five months and more, and I know what’ll be wanted to break through them. Twenty-two heavy guns.’

‘Yes,’ Cormode agreed then. ‘We could pay for them.’

‘Right,’ Keig went on, as if there was no more to be said, ‘there’s something else too. Recruiting. There’s nine or ten men being wounded or killed every day now, and I’m not getting others to fight in their place. I must have them. It’s the estate-owners that’s to blame. They’re keeping the men from volunteering. Aren’t they? Well, why are you letting ‘em?’

Poor Cormode. I wondered if the reason was that he had been too occupied with his own political plans. When I had chanced to meet Clifford Willine a week or so earlier he had boasted to me Cormode was going to launch ‘a full-scale political party to Participate in any future election’. He himself was going to be its general secretary. Hence, I suppose, his anxiety to impart information. I had yet to pass

all this on to Keig, however. I wanted him to hear it at a time when he might take notice.

But Cormode was putting forward excuses. He stationed himself in the clearest space in the cell-like room and delivered a short lecture, with an occasional stiff gesture even. It was, in fact, a not unimpressive performance. Cormode had not been in Oceana long, a few days over five months, and yet plainly there were very few facts even about the years he had been away that he had not already assimilated. Had he been lecturing actual students they would have left with notebooks plainly stating that owing to present social and political conditions much reinforcement of the troops opposing Mr Mylchraine was an impossibility. But he was lecturing the much less tutored Keig.

And after a while Keig looked up at him.

‘You’ve let the estate-owners best you,’ he said.

And, of course, this was it. Seeing Cormode’s arguments in the brutal flash-bulb dazzle of Keig’s statement, I realized that here indeed was the root of the matter. The estate-owners were hardly at all opposed to Mylchraine. Few had even backed Calo, let alone Keig whom they regarded as some sort of outlaw.

Now Keig allowed Cormode to have the lengthy bout of explanation that his own sharp remark had given birth to, but it was no longer a lecture. Cormode stood directly in front of Keig, bent forward at a slight angle, a shininess on his pale skin, a sharpness in his voice, and pushed hard to make a hopeless case. At the end of it Keig asked one more question.

‘When are you to meet them next?’

‘A fortnight tomorrow. As I said, we’ve a long way to—’

‘Tell them the meeting’s for a week today. And they’re to come to me here.’

I had not been altogether happy about Keig's treatment of Cormode. He too after all had been an exile from Mylchraine's tyranny and his very concern with such things as the minutiae of chairmanship was an acknowledgement, if a not very attractive one, of the democratic principle. But, for all the aggressiveness with which Keig had taken negotiations with the estate-owners out of Cormode's hands, I guessed he must have considerable reservations about meeting them. I suspect that he was a little frightened, not of their strength in any contest of wills, but of their ability to make small talk.

Certainly as the day for the meeting drew near—the peremptory 'a week today' had been accepted tamely enough by the estate-owners' informal committee—he began to fuss almost like an old woman, a thing I had hardly ever known him do. He fussed about the hall, he fussed about the sort of table that would be appropriate, he fussed about chairs.

To begin with I had rather liked it: it showed a kind of childishness about him that was not often present. It even brought out my protective instincts. If he really was scared of meeting the assembled aristocracy of Oceana—pitiful and provincial though this was in actual fact—then I was more than happy to put at his service my 'experience of the world'. But then I began to see it all in another light. Keig, the child, vanished: Keig, the capricious autocrat, stepped on to the stage.

When I had arranged the chairs I had acquired with the utmost punctiliousness round a big cloth-covered table he came in to the hall to inspect. There was a long silence.

'Drink,' he said. 'Shouldn't we be giving them something to drink? That's what people do, isn't it? I suppose there may be something to it.'

‘No,’ I said. ‘This is a meeting to discuss business only. Drinks would be out of place. Definitely.’

Keig grunted and went back to his room.

I joined him after making a few final arrangements. But I had positively to persuade him to tackle our routine tasks.

We were busy over a sketch-map of Mylchraine’s defences on the coast south of Portharnel when the sentry outside called that Cormode was there, and a moment later the man himself put his blue-suited shoulders in at the door.

‘They’ve arrived,’ he said. ‘They’re all here. I came with their chairman, Colonel Aleyn.’

I looked at Keig who was standing in silence. Did he know whom Colonel Aleyn was? I did. He was the owner of the house in the remote north that we had burgled on our second day in the island. Then I saw that Keig had recognized the name, but he went on standing there, thinking.

Then, after a pause which seemed to last two or three minutes but which, I suppose, can have been of only some twenty seconds, he stepped forward.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘If you’re ready, I am.’

In the hall at the head of a group of half-a-dozen palpable estate-owners—two actually in plus-fours—was the man I knew at once to be Colonel Aleyn. He was elderly, probably in his seventies, but he held himself with that ramrod straightness of back which some former soldiers never lose. His face was lined and serious, with a neat grey moustache above an unsmiling mouth.

Cormode walked up radiating sticky embarrassment.

‘Colonel,’ he said, ‘I would like to introduce Mr Keig, our military leader.’

‘Good morning,’ Keig said, extremely creakily.

He glanced at the cloth-covered table, and I wondered if I did not see a spark of reassurance in his eyes.

‘Will you sit down?’ he said, with a stiff gesture.

There was a fair amount of fuss as Colonel Aleyn and the five other estate-owners found themselves places. Keig planked himself down in the centre on the opposite side to them, leaning his axe up against his chair in his customary manner. I quickly slipped into the seat beside him.

The moment the team opposite had got themselves sorted out Keig began. He addressed them almost as if he was a prison warder getting on terms with a bunch of semi-imbecile convicts.

‘Now you’re not letting the men on your estates come and fight Mylchraine. And it’s got to stop. Straightaway. Is there any reason why it shouldn’t? Any reason at all?’

There was an affronted rustle opposite.

Colonel Aleyn, who seemed most in control of himself, leant forward.

‘My dear Mr Keig,’ he said, ‘we certainly are not going to let our labourers and tenants leave the farms. That’s where they belong. And we see no purpose at all in them going off to join a set of fellows of your sort.’

Keig glowered forward an inch more.

‘The purpose of them joining me is to finish Mylchraine,’ he said.

‘I wonder,’ Aleyn replied.

Keig gave his small quick frown.

‘What other purpose could there be?’

‘A hundred other purposes, my good chap. To line their pockets, to grab themselves women, to have a gun to loose

off at all and sundry, to try what it feels like to be top dog for a bit—with no responsibilities. All or any of those.'

'No men join me for any of that,' Keig slapped out.

'Oh, come now,' Aleyn answered. 'You can't tell me that, whatever outward purpose young fellows who join you may profess, what the best part of them are really after is to lay their hands on what they can get.'

Keig half started out of his chair. I resisted an impulse to restrain him. He was letting himself get riled frighteningly quickly.

'But I do tell you,' he spluttered at Aleyn now. 'I tell you this straight: no man under my orders does anything at all but fight Mylchraine.'

'So you may believe, Mr Keig. But what happens when you're not there on the spot?'

'Nothing,' Keig declared.

Colonel Aleyn leant back.

'Now, I'm not implying that you do not mean well,' he said. 'But I've had some experience of men under arms. And I know what happens unless discipline's kept tight. I'm not blaming you, but I am saying that we don't want our young fellows leaving the farms to go chasing the girls and living off the fat of the land.'

'And I'm telling you no man under me does that,' Keig shouted back.

I felt an inner flush of shame. Aleyn raised his grey eyebrows.

'Yes, but it's not much use you simply telling us these things aren't so,' he said. 'The fact is from my knowledge of the young man under arms I know them to be so, and I intend to do every single thing in my power to make sure lawlessness is kept to a minimum.'

‘And are you saying I don’t do that?’ Keig replied, still inclined to shout.

Aleyn stayed calm.

‘I believe in straight talking, Mr Keig,’ he answered. ‘Yes, I am saying I think you and your so-called troops are responsible for the appalling state this island’s got into in the last year, and I intend to see your activities are as restricted as I can make them.’

‘You’re telling me my men are out for what they can get?’

Keig’s face had actually flushed with anger and I was profoundly wishing myself elsewhere when, to my total surprise, he jerked round and glared straight at me.

‘Quine,’ he said, ‘tell them about Quiddie.’

3

It was only the complete abruptness of Keig's demand that made it possible for me to respond. After so many months of forcing myself to keep the thought of the brutally high-handed manner of Fred Quiddie's death out of my mind, I could not have brought the facts out into the open had I not been jerked into it. The sweat, I found, was standing all over my body when I had finished the story. What I was seeing then was something I did not put into words: Keig's unmoving face as Fred's body slowly tilted over on to the pallid tiles of that conservatory. For the thousandth time I wondered, now with redoubled sharpness, what sort of a man fundamentally it was who could have carried out that act.

Opposite me Colonel Aleyn and the others sat silent till at last Aleyn gave a dry cough.

'Yes,' he said. 'Yes. Very well, I am prepared to concede that your men, Mr Keig, are kept under better discipline than I thought.'

Keig grimly nodded acknowledgement.

'And yet,' Aleyn resumed, 'I must equally tell you I still feel by no means inclined to let the hands go, even to become well-disciplined soldiers. Half of my days were spent as a soldier and I put the military life second to none. But we haven't been accustomed to looking for a military solution to our troubles in Oceana, and I don't think we ought to be today.'

Keig's open palm smacked down on the table in front of him. Its boards boomed out.

'That's damned foolishness,' he said. 'Haven't you people got eyes in your heads? Do you really believe Mylchraine can be stopped beyond by fighting him? Do you know what he's had done to men, and to women? What he's doing still?'

Opposite him Aleyn remained calm.

'I'm not saying Mr Mylchraine's any sort of a saint,' he replied. 'But he is the legal ruler of this island.'

'That man's no more legal ruler of Oceana than a crow's the legal ruler of a dead sheep it's tearing the guts out of,' Keig retorted. 'Mylchraine cursed and bullied and cheated his way to where he got, and I'm putting him out of it.'

I thought I saw at this a quick look of pure disdain in the colonel's severe steady face.

'Yes, Mr Mylchraine may have bullied and cheated,' he said. 'But let's be clear. You're no better, Mr Keig.'

My first instinct was shocked anger. But even as it welled up I knew Aleyn might be speaking no more than the truth. 'I'm putting him out of it': Keig's words seemed as much a claim to ultimate power as anything that had come from Mylchraine.

And Keig was blustering, surely, now.

'I'm no better than Mylchraine, am I?' he shouted.

'From all I hear,' Aleyn replied, 'you've done your share of bullying, and of looting.'

Keig's hand dropped like a weighted sling down to the handle of the axe beside his chair.

No, I thought, he can't.

‘Looting?’ he yelled in a voice which reverberated round the bare hall. ‘You dare say looting.’

‘Yes,’ Aleyn said quietly. ‘My own house was looted by you and your men.’

And Keig acknowledged the truth of it.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘You’re right. We did loot your house, if you like to call it that. If we hadn’t been unlucky and been set on, we’d have left you a receipt. For twelve shotguns, a quantity of food, and no cartridges. Oh, aye, and one little razor.’

Oddly it was this last item that the colonel fastened on.

‘My favourite razor,’ he said. ‘Taken from my own bathroom.’

Keig looked at him.

‘You can have it back if you want,’ he said, somewhat stiffly. ‘I’ve still got it. I use it every morning.’

‘Well, I will have it, if you don’t mind,’ Aleyn replied. ‘I’ve never got on so well with my other one.’

‘Aye,’ Keig said. ‘It’s a nice little razor right enough. It’s got a balance to it. Still, it’s yours if you want.’

And, to my continuing surprise, in mild small talk about the ins-and-outs of shaving Keig and Aleyn began exchanging civilities like any pair of old ambassadors.

It was not the end of the clash. But it was the beginning of the end, and by the time the meeting broke up it had been agreed that we would stop recruiting until the harvest was in, but that after that no one would put any obstacles in the way of the men who wanted to join us.

Sheer bloody-minded toughness is not always a disadvantage for a negotiator, I found myself reflecting as I left the hall.

In fact this meeting materially advanced our eventual assault on Lesneven. For one thing, although we did no recruiting, a steady stream of new men presented themselves all summer, and, for another thing, Cormode now his one administrative failure could be forgotten loosened the purse-strings with despatch and pushed through the purchase of howitzers in a way that did full justice to his reputation as a getter-of-things-done.

Mylchraine, on the other hand, failed to get things done. The months went by, June, July, August, and still the flame-throwing tanks did not materialize. We gathered eventually that the deal had gone through, but no country was willing to face the outcry bound to go up if the much-publicized despot of Oceana was permitted to ship weapons through its ports.

There were moments when I questioned the way we left so much to that getter-of-things-done Cormode. But in the two and a half years we had been in the island we had become soldiers and, extraordinarily but truly, nothing else. So it came naturally simply not to think about anything except the immediate task. Yet one moment of doubt I do remember.

Keig had seized the opportunity presented by fine weather after a spell of cloaky days to make a study in good visibility of a section of the front a few miles south of Hoddick, a point that was likely to be vital in the great assault, and he and I had gone up to the most forward observation-post in the area, a platform formed by the bole of a huge oak, probably one of the first to be felled when Mylchraine began using the island's long-maturing trees as quick revenue, to judge by the screen of well-covered stems all round it. For nearly half an hour I had lain silent as Keig's field-glasses had methodically roamed over the landscape. Then at last he began to talk, outlining ways of moving men up to the enemy lines.

I was surprised at the size of the force he was envisaging and said something about whether we would be able to spare so many men for this small area.

‘You think the estate-owners won’t let us recruit after all?’ Keig said.

‘No,’ I replied. ‘From what I hear—not that you learn all that much from the wolds lot—there’s already hardly an estate where anyone puts anything in their way. You’ve certainly got your friend Aleyn working for you now.’

Keig grunted. I think my reference to ‘your friend’ pleased him a little.

‘What do you think then?’ he asked. ‘That everything’s not all right back there?’

So you are worried, I thought.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘we don’t know all that much about what’s going on, do we? Did you know Cormode’s formed a political party, for instance? It’s called the Progress party.’

‘What does he want to do that for? Were there political Parties before Mylchraine closed up the Rota?’

I smiled at the extent of his innocent ignorance.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘there were Parties, but most of the Delegates used to be elected on their own merits.’

‘And Cormode wants to be a Delegate when the Rota is opened again?’

‘Of course he does. He’d like to be more than that, come to think of it. He’d like to be President of the Rota.’

‘But he’d be no—’

A stir of movement in the Keepers’ lines attracted his attention. He brought up his field-glasses.

‘No,’ he said after a few moments. ‘Just a relief party coming up to that machine-gun in the big bramble thicket

straight ahead.'

'Keig,' I said, 'have you been seeing yourself as President when all this is over?'

Beside me Keig's broad body shifted sharply.

'When all this is over,' he said. 'You go on like you think you've only got to say it. "When all this is over," and it'll just be all over. Well, that's not the way of it. See that field there, this side of the bramble-patch? I reckon eighty men've got to go right across that before too long. Straight across. There's no way round that'll be quick enough. How many of 'em do you think are going to reach those brambles?'

I wondered whether to try and explain that I was indeed frightenedly aware of what was going to happen. But I saw he was right to rebuke me: if we were going to crush Mylchraine during some few days and nights probably towards the end of October, then neither he nor I had even half a moment to think about anything beyond that. Concentration alone would do it, especially from the man who, in that one strong body of his, was the tiny cell that powered our whole enterprise.

Concentration was what our enterprise certainly got during that autumn, our third on the island and the sixth I had spent with Keig. Simply inexperienced in all the business of fighting a real war, we were embarking on what even among the bigger nations of the world would have been considered quite a respectable battle, worthy of its three lines in the history books. 'The assault on Lesneven took place in the autumn of that year and marked the final —' The final what? The 'final ascendancy of the despot of Oceana'? It very well might be. Or 'the final triumph of the peasant-born soldier-statesman Thomas Keig'? It had to be.

In the bare Kermaddack Assembly Room table after table was set up to deal with all the paperwork. Keig and paperwork, I had never thought to see the two so linked. But you cannot bring hundreds of fighting-men into position along a front that extends for thirty miles ready for a single great attack without making innumerable lists, preparing sheet upon sheet of orders, sending thousands of memos —‘reminders’ Keig always called them, and more credit to him.

But as if to point out to us we were not simply shuffling pieces of paper but sending one lot of men to death perhaps at one place and another lot to death at a different place there came at almost every hour of the day through the tall grey-glassed windows the tramp of marching feet. It was, I admit, hardly the disciplined crack of several hundred heels descending as one of a British Guards regiment. Our men still loped along as in our earliest days in straggling lines. But the sound was that of soldiers, if only because we were now able to equip every fighting-man with a stout pair of steel-tipped boots.

We had a factory for making them. We had hospitals for our wounded. And towards the end of August we had opened a rifle workshop.

Complaints, which I take some credit for passing on to Keig, had come in about the difficulties our troops, still armed to about half their strength with shotguns, were experiencing up against the Keepers who now all had rifles or machine-guns. I will admit my solution was to press Cormode to buy more rifles. It was Keig who said we must make our own.

‘They make them on the North-west Frontier,’ he said.
‘Why can’t we?’

‘The North-west Frontier?’

‘Yes. I don’t know just where that is, but there was this general I read about back in Dublin and at the start he was out there and he said the tribesmen had their own rifles. If they could, we can.’

We could. And three weeks after this conversation the first crude hand-made rifle, converted from a shotgun, was ready. Keig examined the new weapon with the minutest care, and at last produced his comment.

‘It’ll do very well. But there’s one thing.’

‘What?’ demanded our gunsmith, an old man we had wheedled from his blacksmith’s forge.

Keig slapped the butt of the new weapon.

‘It needs our mark on it,’ he said. ‘Everybody’s got to know it’s us who can make these things. Burn a “K” on it. Burn one on every rifle we make. A “K”.’

So Keig chose without hesitation as the mark to put on all the products of our rifle factory the letter denoting his own name. Was it a sign of another step along Mylchraine’s path? Once more I reserved judgment. There was nothing else I could do. I was too busy, just as Keig was too busy. Events had us in their grasp.

All too soon there came the time when men first marched through the square outside the Assembly Room at night. Each time I surfaced from sleep I heard faintly through the thick granite walls, but clearly enough, the ring of steel-tipped heels on cobblestones in a rhythm single but steady, then breaking a little, then resuming.

And then Keig fixed the hour of the assault.

He had spent all day seeing brigade commanders who had been summoned from their posts. Each he put through his questioning process—tough, uncompromising, devoid of any politenesses, capable of forcing men to remember things they were unaware of having observed and make

deductions they would not have thought themselves capable of.

When late at night the last of them had gone Keig took from his pocket a scrap of paper which he had not up till now allowed me to see. It was a list of days around the end of October and beginning of November. Against each day were jotted notes about its suitability as the time of our great throw. He studied them in silence and then looked at me and jabbed his thick black-nailed finger down.

I craned forward and read.

'Oct 31. No moon till late. Men in place 2 days. Punky Night.'

'Punky Night?' I queried.

'Aye. If I'm right there'll be drinking, dancing naked and the rest of it that night in Lesneven. It might help.'

He grunted.

'They'll be wanting it in the rest of the island too, I dare say,' he added. 'But there'll be not so much as a smell of anything among my men.'

From outside came the ringing of boots on cobbles once more as a new detachment passed by.

'That must be one of the last lots to go up,' I said. 'By dawn tomorrow every man is due to be in his final position.'

I was only talking. Mouthing a few words to paste over the gaping awe I felt because the die had now been cast. Keig made no reply since no reply was needed.

In the silence of the night the sound of the marching men sang out clearly, made the more ringing by the first of the autumn's frosts. They still had a moon to march under just now. But in two nights to come, on Punky Night, there would be no moon.

4

The assault lasted for the best part of forty-eight hours, and for almost all that time the outcome was constantly in doubt.

Late in the afternoon of October 31, as dusk was beginning to fall for Punky Night with its openly secret rites and rituals, Keig led those of us who formed his battle staff—though we never had any reverberant title of this sort—off to a point about a mile behind the front south-west of Lesneven where a water-tower, which had been half destroyed by the Keepers when they had acquired our howitzers and were inclined to be sportive, stood up gauntly in a stretch of quiet countryside. Between its two solid granite walls, on which the big tank had been perched, we stretched a large tarpaulin to form a roof, since from shortly before we had set off rain had been falling, as it was to do for all the time of the battle.

Keig ordered us not to light the hurricane lamps we had, so as not to give the slightest opportunity to some unfriendly civilian—and with the stony-eyed woldsmen you never knew—to signal a message to the Keepers. So we sat in the gathering darkness and just waited.

And then, on time to the second, the battle began. Every single gun we possessed started laying down its barrage, pathetic by World War standards but fearsomely extravagant to us. The rain-splotched night was filled through and through with mere noise.

We all jumped up and went outside. The sky all the way along, north and south, was lit by repeated flashes of light. And then, with varying periods of delay, there came the light flashes from in front of us, from inside Mylchraine's iron ring, the counter-bombardment.

'You can light the lanterns,' Keig said with a grunt of heavy-handed humour when the first enemy battery opened up. 'They know we've begun it now.'

I went back inside our tower and one by one lit the four storm-lamps. From a shelter in a field nearby a cow greeted the yellowy light with one long complaining moo, just audible under the continuous crumping of the guns.

Eventually our barrage petered abruptly to its end and we were able to make out, when the wind blew a little more strongly, the tat-tatting of small-arms fire. We knew then that things had begun properly: that men were meeting in combat face-to-face, were running across open spaces in the dark and the rain and being shot at. But the distant rattly sound did not somehow live up to such thoughts. So we sat down again knowing under our tarpaulin that it might be more than another half hour before anyone over there would have anything to tell us.

And then, with a suddenness that almost made me cry out, the first message came. It was on one of the field-telephones. First there was the whirring noise of the distant operator cranking his call-handle, then the man crouching ready beside the instrument at our end snatched up the handset, all sweaty-fingered, and jabbered at it 'Yes? Yes? Who's that? What is it?' Then the intent listening. And finally the operator, looking across at Keig, gulped visibly before speaking.

'From Mr Dogan, Mr Keig. He hasn't reached his objective, and it's twenty minutes past his time. They had a machine-gun we never spotted. Mr Keig, he's lost twelve men.'

But already Francis Crowe was bending over his walkie-talkie, speaking quietly but very precisely. It was impossible to make out what his distant operator was saying, or even from which of the far sets the message was coming. But in a minute there was the neat 'Over and out'—Francis had forgotten nothing of his drill—and a new report to Keig.

'Portharnel South, that was. All objectives reached. Artillery barrage completely effective. Ready for next phase.'

And now our other telephone-man, reporting an unexpected degree of success in the sector right next to our first failure. Keig was already peering at one of the maps he had slipped out of the haversack in which I had carefully folded the various sheets in the way most likely to be of use.

'That's Corkan, isn't it?' he asked.

'Yes, Mr Keig.'

'Then tell him to send twenty men out to his left. Tell him there's a machine-gun post somewhere there and it's holding us up.'

'Yes, Mr Keig.'

And then the message going out in that high careful monotonous voice I was to hear so much of in the next two days. '. . . twenty men to your left, repeat left, where a machine-gun post . . .' And already the message was having to compete in my ears with other messages coming in and going out. And already mistakes were being made and unexpected successes were putting unexpected problems in front of us, and all of us under that taut tarpaulin with the rain steadily drumming down on it were working flat out, trying from all this distance to influence the miles-long struggle we had started.

The night went hurrying by, and, except that I had to note down when certain messages were received with the idea of

us getting some general picture later, I was not really conscious at any moment of what time it was.

A sullen dawn crept in at last. Twice at intervals during the night when things had momentarily been quieter I had conscientiously eaten a sandwich and had handed one to Keig feeling it was my duty to 'keep my strength up' and his. And it was in another such short respite, shortly after full daylight—such as it was with the dense grey blanket of weeping cloud above us—that I got up from my empty ammunition-box seat, tucked my pad of papers under my arm and one by one extinguished the unnecessary storm lanterns. The small break in the routine attracted Keig's attention. He stood too, stretching in a wide yawn that even under his thick coat showed all the strength of his enormous shoulders.

'I want to go over what's happened along the whole line,' he said to me. 'Now the men over there can see what they're doing things'll be different.'

I carried my box-seat over nearer to his and side by side we went over the whole extent of the front, noting where our plans had failed to come up to expectations and where perhaps an unexpected success might present a chance of breaking through somewhere where we had not thought we would be able to. On the whole it was a decidedly satisfactory picture that emerged. Almost all our objectives for the night had been reached, and at several places we had done much better than we had hoped. Keig grunted his final approval.

'They weren't so ready on Punky Night then,' he said.

I smiled agreement, stood up and stretched in my turn.

In the gateway at the far end of the field over which we looked I noticed that a small party of men had suddenly appeared. There were, I suppose, about a dozen of them of whom four were wearing the easily-spotted orangey-red

caps of the new recruits of our support forces. They were the ones carrying the stretchers. The rest of the party, helmeted but limping and broken, were contriving to make their own way along despite the roughly bandaged wounds that, as they came nearer to us along the field-wall, became easier to see through the still steady downpour.

I glanced at Keig. Distracted by my sudden silence, he too was looking over at the straggling sodden group moving with pathetic slowness along the edge of the field.

‘Now,’ he said sharply, ‘this is what I want to try for today.’

I forced myself to look back at the map spread on the big board across Keig’s knees. And, without the slightest sign of having seen anything out of the way, he began to outline his plans.

They were good plans, I later came to realize. Keig had seized squarely on the new factors that had arisen out of the higgledy-piggledy fighting of the night, and from these had fashioned a possible way into the heart of Lesneven that we could not have guessed existed before the assault began. It looked, in fact, as if he had hit on a weakness in Mylchraine’s whole defensive system. It seemed that, over-concerned about being cut off from Portharnel, his only source of the flame-throwing tanks that would roll up our forces like a done-with map, he had concentrated his strength in the part of his line between the port and Lesneven. North of the capital, although his defences had appeared to bristle with men, blockhouses and artillery, in fact there was only an outward screen. And our probing attacks of the night had succeeded in penetrating deeply enough to reveal this.

But I was finding it hard to concentrate on what Keig was telling me. The thought of what it was we were doing to so many men, of whom the pathetic group across the field

were but a sample, was hammering, almost hysterically, at my tensed-up mind.

But in face of Keig's relentless pounding out of the details of his new plans it was not possible to let other thoughts than those he wanted me to be thinking have any share in my head for long. And soon I was furiously jotting down notes of the new orders it would be necessary to send.

At last he finished.

He jumped to his feet.

'Get those messages off,' he said. 'I'm going to shave.'

And from the pocket of his coat he produced the new razor he had bought himself after his forced loan had been returned to Colonel Aleyn and stumped off through the steady rain towards a Particularly large puddle some twenty yards away.

Watching him for a moment as he knelt in the mud, dipped the razor into the thick water of the puddle and brought it up to his chin, I felt almost as if I was receiving rays of strength shooting directly out at me from that broad bent back. I turned to look over at the far side of the field: the party of wounded had already gone through the gate into the sunken lane behind us. I hurried across to Francis Crowe, sitting on a neatly folded groundsheet beside his walkie-talkie set, and together we started sending out the new orders.

Within about an hour we were receiving the first reports of the success Keig's new plans were having. And as the day went by—with never a let-up in that drumming rain—bit by bit our men in the north got nearer and nearer Lesneven itself.

By the afternoon they were on the outskirts, and, standing up to take a short stroll and stretch my cramped muscles, I saw coming through the same distant gateway

where I had seen just after dawn that wet and weary group of wounded men a group of a very different sort. Marching heads down in front of a pair of young orangey-capped guards were no fewer than twenty captured Keepers. They looked an odd sight with their bedraggled green uniforms retaining that distinctly countrified touch they had always had but with grim storm-trooper helmets replacing the feather-cockaded hats of the days of their supremacy in the island, and I allowed myself to stand and stare for some minutes as they tramped along the side of the field in the rain. Somehow the sight of them coming away from the distant crackly area of the fighting put into my head the conception of ultimate victory as something more than a far ideal.

As they reached the end of the field, at the gate to the sunken lane behind there appeared one of the many teams of horses and carts that had passed by us all day taking food up to the front. There was a moment of hesitation as the two Parties met at the gateway, the young orange-capped guards with their sullen prisoners and the countrymen up on their carts, shoulders hunched under sacks to protect them from the rain. Then the leading countryman pulled his horse to a halt.

Suddenly from behind me came a roar of sound.

‘No.’

I swung round, considerably startled.

It was Keig. I had thought that watching these first prisoners to come our way might be rather below him and had not done anything to draw his attention to the sight, heartening to me though it was. But evidently he had been looking on too, and now he was, as evidently, pretty angry about something.

He strode through the rain towards the gateway where prisoners, guards and countrymen up on their carts all

stared at him in silence. When he was about twenty yards away he stopped.

‘Those carts go through first,’ he shouted at the guards. ‘You keep that lot against the wall till they’re all past. There’s food for men who’re fighting in there.’

He swung round again, marched back to our shelter and planked himself squarely down on his ammunition-box once more. Shamefacedly the two guards—they must have been only about sixteen or seventeen—lined up the captured Keepers against the wall and waited while the carts, the last of them laden with cans of rapidly-cooling tea protected by straw wrappings, slowly creaked and lumbered their way past and on up to the fighting zone.

Traffic of this sort along the grey drystone wall at the far side of the big field in which our ruined water-tower stood was a running thread in the background for the whole of that first day of fighting. It bore, I suppose, in reality little actual relation to the progress of the battle but for me it did seem to form a true link with the terrible events that I had had my share in setting in motion. The messages that came in, on the master walkie-talkie, on the two field-telephones, kept us technically in touch with what was going on. But the news they brought, of a spinney captured, of an enemy howitzer definitely located and ready to be blasted out of existence by the fire of our own guns which I would order, was as far as I was concerned no more than fodder for the much-creased maps in the haversack at Keig’s side. They meant little more than a new mark to be made with difficulty on the dampened paper. They did nothing to bring home the things that were really happening to men crouching beneath the killing fire of a distant machine-gun, stumbling forward among shell-bursts through the ever-falling rain, raising their rifles and endeavouring to hold a hardly visible green-clad figure in the sights. But the passing processions along the field-edge—the groups of bitter

prisoners, the small Parties of wounded, the creaking ration carts—were signs I could grasp to share in what was actually happening over there.

It was in this way that I became aware that a new stage had begun in the long struggle. Shortly before it had started to get dark at the end of that short rain-washed November day I saw at the far gateway the first men coming back from the front after being relieved. The men who had taken over from them must, I thought, have gone up by a different route. I had seen nothing of them. And then I realized that, of course, they had used a different way up: I myself had worked out the route they were to take and had given Francis Crowe the order to send to them. And I too had ordered these men, now slowly making their way along the field-wall, to follow this Particular route back.

What had I told them to do next? I cudgelled my tired brain to remember. Ah, yes. 'Use the first shelter you find out of the firing zone.' Where would they go? Poor devils, they looked battered and soaked enough. Should I have tried to make sure they had somewhere definite to rest? No, there was nothing I could have done to find a place anywhere. It was up to their commander—if they still had a commander—to make his own arrangements.

And as I stood in the shelter of our now heavily sagging tarpaulin watching, the commander, whoever he was, did indeed use his initiative. I heard a distant rain-muted shout and then saw the men wearily heave themselves over the wall and make their way across the next gently rising field. A minute or two later vigorous moos of protest came from the cow-shelter in the far field: a take-over had been made. And the next time I had a moment to look about me I saw the whole group sitting on the rails of the shelter with their boots off and their oddly lily-white feet clearly visible in the rainy gloom right across two fields. Soon the smoke from a cooking-fire went drifting up towards the low grey sky. For

some men at least, I thought, the pressure is off for a little. For their sakes I wished the whole business might be over and done before, looking down at a list, I had to select a number and send them back to face the bullets again.

Yet in the paper battle I was helping to conduct, the struggle taking place between thick pencil marks on the heavy dampened sheets of our maps, before long it began to look very much as if I would indeed have to consult my lists, select various numbers and wait for the messages that would indicate that various groups having rested a few hours had gone back to the front again. Because, as the first hours of darkness went by, more and more it looked as if a position of stalemate had been arrived at. We had done better during the day than we had thought we might, and certainly we had gained an enormous advantage in having got as close as we had done to the heart of Mylchraine's shrunken territory by penetrating into the northern suburbs of Lesneven, now marked for us at the water-tower by the sullen glow of burning buildings. But, having gained this advantage, reserves which Mylchraine had thrown in were now holding up our every effort to advance further.

The orders kept going out from Keig, the flat words that were sending men to their deaths. 'Push forward,' 'You must get beyond such-and-such a point,' 'Send out strong patrols' and the replies kept coming in 'Attack failed,' 'All but two men wounded,' 'Ground ahead under heavy machine-gun fire.'

From the cow-shelter in the next field, indicated in the rainy dark by the small glint of the men's bivouac fire, there came in snatches the sound of a mouth-organ playing a song, whiny and thin but cheerful. That cheerfulness was bound soon, I feared, to be abruptly cut off with the receipt of an order I myself might give sending them back into the battle.

I had come to feel in my dog-tired state, that those distant yet close men were somehow key figures. I did not want them to go back over there to the fighting in that dark glow of burning buildings punctuated by the occasional sharp flashes of gun-fire and the following rumbles of heavy sound. I did not want those few human beings who mysteriously linked me to the battle to have to die. I longed to ask Keig what hope he thought they had. And I knew I must not. To nag at him now with irrelevant worries would be selfish beyond words: he had his solitary burden to bear, heavier far than any of ours.

So the second night wore on, much like the first in its externals. The messages came in about as frequently as they had come in the night before. The orders went out. I handed Keig new maps from time to time as I had done twenty-four hours earlier. I made notes, kept referring to my watch, went over to Francis Crowe and the telephone-men—they at least had been relieved—mechanically ate every now and again a somewhat stale sandwich and swallowed at intervals some scarcely warm tea. But the excitement had gone out of the messages we received, the zest of urgency from the orders we sent out. A slogging grimness extended over everything, as pervasive as the still incessantly dripping rain.

At 3.34 a.m.—I noted the time as carefully, as mechanically as all the other times I had noted—a message came in which did send a tremor through us, every one. Francis pushed himself up from his padded groundsheet on the trampled muddy earth and came over to deliver it personally instead of calling it across as he had been doing with other messages for hours past.

He stooped closely down to Keig as if he was anxious for what he had to say not to be heard by anyone other than Keig himself. But I was too near them to miss a word.

‘From Mr Corrowane, Mr Keig, with the battery at Lesneven South. No further ammunition. Over and out.’

Little tubby Francis’s face, with its stubble of pale hair, was stretched and strained. He knew as well as Keig that it was no supply failure that had deprived that battery of its ammunition. If it had none it was because there was none to supply it with. And if there was none for this battery, quite soon there would be none for any of the others.

Keig turned to me.

‘Get a message to all the batteries except Lesneven North,’ he said. ‘Stop shooting. Send any unused shells back to the Central Dump. Tell Central to send to Lesneven North and nowhere else.’

‘Right.’

I pushed myself off my uncomfortable ammunition-box seat and went over to the field-telephones to pass on the orders. From the distant front in the darkness I could see the quick flashes of the howitzers on Mylchraine’s side. Their rain-dampened crumping notes followed a few instants later. No shortage of ammunition there.

And before long the advantage Mylchraine had acquired began to tell. The messages that came in started complaining of the impossibility of advancing, or even of holding ground already gained, without artillery support. And there was nothing by way of reassurance we could send in reply.

Just at dawn we got a sharper warning than any before of the grimness of the situation.

We were all at our various tasks. I had noted that daylight had almost fully come but I had decided that the storm-lanterns could be left burning for a little while yet. To have had to peer at things in the heavy rain-filled light would have been just one more imposition on our already ground-

down existence. I knew that I had had a steadily thudding headache for an hour or more, and I had no doubt that the others were suffering in similar ways.

Then, quite suddenly, a figure swung round one of the tower walls and presented itself in our midst. Only then did I recall that I had heard a sentry challenging and, stupid with tiredness, had thrust the intrusion out of my mind the moment I had realized what it was.

The man who had so abruptly come in on us seemed familiar. I got up and, blinking my tired eyes, looked at him more closely.

‘Cannell,’ I said.

It was the young mountain shepherd who years before had taken sides briefly with Jack Ascough in the short mutiny against Keig’s leadership that had followed the fiasco of our raid on Colonel Aleyn’s house in our first hours on the island. But he looked like a young man no more, though he could scarcely have been much over twenty-two. I remembered he was a full-blown commander now, with as many as a hundred men under him. That responsibility can have been no light task. He stood in front of us with the weight of prolonged fatigue stamping his face into haggardness. His beard, I saw, was matted with mud, and what looked like blood as well.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

Slowly he raised his right arm and made with it a vague gesture towards the distant front. It looked as if even making such a slight movement was more than he could force himself to do.

I remembered that I had a mug half full of tea, by now no doubt quite cold. I looked round for it, spotted it, stooped and picked it up. And then, sitting the lad down on my

ammunition-box, I held the mug to his lips. He took a swallow and seemed grateful. I held the mug up again.

‘No.’

With an almost directionless lunge from his shoulder he sent the mug tumbling out of my hand.

‘No,’ he repeated. ‘Not.’

There was an agonizingly long pause. I realized that everybody under the tarpaulin was looking at us now.

‘Not when they—they are still there,’ young Cannell managed to bring out.

Suddenly I was aware that Keig was at my side. His broad-shouldered frame towered over the hunched shepherd.

‘What’s that you’re saying?’ he barked out. ‘You’re telling us you won’t take that tea because there are men still fighting out there?’

Cannell looked up. I saw that his eyes were blazing, deep sunk in their sockets.

‘No,’ he shouted. ‘No. They must come back now. It’s gone on too long.’

‘Cannell,’ Keig answered. ‘It’s gone on too long when I say it has.’

Cannell swayed to his feet.

‘You murderer. You bloody murderer. Get up there yourself. Feel what it’s like. I came back to tell you myself: my men can’t go on with it any longer. I’m going back to them now. And I’m taking the order to pull out. It’s at an end. At an end, do you hear me?’

‘Quine,’ Keig said, jerking round to me. ‘Take him away and get him tied up where he can do no harm. Then find me someone to put in charge of his men.’

I took hold of Cannell's arm. But there was no need for the tough measures I would have had little heart to take. As my fingers closed round his elbow his whole body suddenly sagged and he fell at my feet.

I shook my head to clear it and called to the sentry down in the sunken lane behind us. A moment or two later he thrust his head round the side wall, looking anxious in case he had done wrong by letting Cannell come up to us. I told him to carry the lad off and see that he got attention. Then I fumbled through my lists to find someone we could signal to take charge of Cannell's men.

I found a name at last and submitted it to Keig.

'Yes,' he said, 'I know him, he'll do.'

I was about to go away and see that the message was sent off when Keig laid a hand on my arm.

I turned back.

'He was right, you know,' Keig said. 'His men ought not to be made to go on with this any more.'

So this was going to be it, I thought. A quiet ending.

5

Keig looked up at me, his deep eyes glowing more intensely than I had ever before seen them.

‘Yet in spite of it all the fighting’s got to go on,’ he said. ‘The men out there have to go past the time they ought to be let stop. They have to be made to go on. I have to make them.’

For a moment his eyes held mine and I felt that he had the power to do just what he had spoken of: to radiate energy, it almost seemed, all the way over to those battling, frightened, rain-soaked, wounded, sleepless men caught up in the turmoil round Mylchraine’s ring of iron.

‘Now go and send that name off,’ Keig added abruptly. ‘And come back to me as soon as you have.’

I went in a daze of admiration for him, with at that moment not the slightest inward reservations about what such personal power could do, and sent the name we had agreed on off to that distant point in the fighting zone where Cannell’s leaderless men waited his return.

And when I went back to Keig he had ready in his mind a whole series of new orders, the actual and visible means of imposing his will on that far-off struggle. If sheer strength of mind can win battles, I thought—and I believed at that moment it could—then Keig can win this battle.

And it was in a reply to that new batch of orders that the first sign of the breakthrough came. A simple message, ‘Have occupied Old Watch-point.’ But the Old Watch-point,

in Lesneven, that picturesque semi-ruin, was, as we well knew, perched on the highest piece of ground in the whole northern part of the city. If we really held it, and could continue to hold it for a few hours, it should give us the capital.

Orders flowed now from Keig like a gush of spring water breaking from the ground. He moved men in to support the newly gained position, relentlessly he withdrew other forces to back the vital thrust, and he sent glowing words of encouragement to the men at the key point itself.

And just an hour before dusk, when the messages back began reporting new signs of success, he suddenly lurched to his feet.

‘Go and get the car started,’ he said to me. ‘I’m going to see it for myself.’

I ran, I positively ran, down to the car. I had a hell of a time getting the engine to turn over—the plugs must have got thoroughly wet in all those hours exposed to the pouring rain and I had to take them out and wipe them in the end—but I was not in the least put out. I knew now that triumph was going to be ours. If Keig could leave his central command post then he must be sure of it. And I shared that sureness to the full.

We drove gloriously through the sodden countryside as the light began to fail. We came to a screeching halt in an area where thirty-six hours earlier the Keepers had lounged in comfort. We hurried forward at a half-run on and on till we came to the outer edges of Lesneven itself. And finally we were in time, just, to witness that extraordinary moment when the resistance in front of our men suddenly simply melted away and they were able to advance in a joyous, laughing, helter-skelter charge across ground disputed in blood not a few minutes before.

That night we spent in the shell-scarred offices of the
Oceana Messenger.

Part Six

1

But Mylchraine got away.

What had happened soon became plain. The moment that the Keepers' resistance had collapsed in front of us—that moment which Keig and I had actually witnessed, crouching at one instant beside the wild-eyed commander of the men who had captured the Old Watch-point with bullets whining over us in the gloom of the rainy day's end, and the next realizing that no more shots were being fired ahead of us and listening to a sound which could only be that of running feet fading into the distance—that moment had been the one at which Mylchraine had set out from the town quay for the Kernel in a launch crammed with his personal bodyguard, and someone left behind had realized that their leader had deserted them and had passed the word for everyone remaining to save themselves.

Keig did everything he could. All next day while in the streets our men, able for the first time in months to walk upright without fear of coming under fire, wandered joyfully about, he busied himself with dark and settled purpose in finding out every single thing possible about his flown-bird arch-enemy. And I, of course, was required to accompany him on this quest, to take notes, pick up the pieces, smooth the way.

Only once did he break off from his relentless inquiries about what arms had gone over to the Kernel and the number of men and the nature of their equipment. And this was to order the burning of the town's principal whiskey

warehouse, the one that Mylchraine himself had purchased as one of the first steps in his climb to absolute power.

It was an awesome sight indeed when the flames eventually took full hold. They brought to nothingness the other fires the town had suffered during the fighting. Where those had been ordinary affairs with the flames seldom more than half as high again as the buildings they sprang from, this was quite extraordinary, feeding as it was on pure spirit. The flames, brilliant and clear, leapt up in a single high tongue to the whole height again of the big warehouse and higher. Casks exploded inside with the sharp reverberation of firing guns and at each explosion new jets of pure flame spurted high to add to the substance of the central pyramid. The dazzling white light lit the whole town, it seemed, in a glare of unearthly purity.

Yet, returning to our headquarters in the *Messenger* building, my old anxiety over Keig was quick to bare its teeth momentarily once more. Wasn't this a pretty high-handed act of his when you came to look at it? Of course the people of the island had been corrupted by generous supplies of artificially cheapened whiskey. We had proved it. But all the same the actual spirit flaring up so dramatically in front of our eyes now must belong to someone. It was some individual's property, perhaps ultimately Mylchraine's but yet bought with money from, no doubt, all sorts of people's pockets. And here was Keig with a flick of his fingers ordering it to be sent up in flames. Just because he himself hated it, and probably hated it all the more because of the accidental factor of his own head being too weak to tolerate the stuff, he had commanded it to be destroyed. Just what had been his exact motives in giving the order for this startling blaze to be lit?

It was while we were busy in the editor's office beginning to co-ordinate our findings about Mylchraine's resources on the Kernel—with that varying, bright, eerie light from the

blazing warehouse still illuminating my scribbled notes—that the sentry on the stairs called up to us.

‘Mr Keig.’

‘Yes?’ I answered for him.

‘Mr Cormode is here.’

I glanced at Keig questioningly.

He thought for an instant.

‘We’ll give him a few minutes,’ he said.

I called to the guard to show Cormode up.

He came striding in, still wearing one of his dark out-of-place pin-striped suits—perhaps it was his only one—and went straight up to where Keig sat behind the editor’s desk with his hand out-thrust and pale face glowing.

‘We’ve done it,’ he said. ‘Magnificent. I give you the fullest credit.’

Keig looked at that extended hand for a moment and only then took it and gave it the briefest of shakes.

‘We haven’t done it all the same,’ he said.

Cormode was quick. A glint of sharp apprehension appeared in his eyes.

‘You mean Mr Mylchraine?’ he said. ‘It’s certainly a pity he managed to get out ahead of you. But I don’t think you can in the least blame yourself. And we’ll flush him out easily enough.’

‘How?’

Just that.

Cormode blinked.

‘My dear fellow,’ he replied, ‘naturally I leave the details to you. You’re the one who has shown military genius, real

military genius. But I wouldn't have thought that Mr Mylchraine could present any very great difficulties.'

'You know he's got howitzers over there, and the big coast defence battery?' Keig said. 'I haven't finished reading through these reports yet, but already we've made sure he's got all the ammunition he could want.'

Cormode shrugged his shoulders.

'In any case Mr Mylchraine no longer matters,' he said. 'We're in Lesneven now.'

Keig's dark face almost convulsively darkened even further.

'We're here,' he said. 'And Mylchraine's there. There sitting in that great house of his, lord and master. Surely to God, you don't think this business is finished?'

The friendliness Cormode had exuded from the moment he had stepped in now faded visibly.

'I'll tell you quite frankly what I do think, Mr Keig,' he said. 'I consider that the first priority is to get proper democratic government functioning in the island once again. That's our duty. And I would view with gravest suspicion any military adventures that might jeopardize that task.'

'So you're against finishing Mylchraine,' Keig declared, almost physically thrusting his way through Cormode's verbiage.

'Yes,' Cormode answered him. 'If you want to put it in that way, I am against finishing Mylchraine at the present time. I consider there are things that take precedence, the holding of an election, the re-establishment of order.'

'Nothing comes before getting that man,' Keig replied with a complete uncompromisingness that I felt I could hardly go all the way with.

I give Peter Cormode considerable credit for not flinching under it. Indeed, he positively fought back.

‘I am afraid I must disagree,’ he said. ‘And perhaps while we are on the subject of policy I may add that I also disagree with your firing of that whiskey warehouse out there. I’m told it was done on your Particular orders. Is that so?’

‘It was,’ Keig growled. ‘Whiskey has drained the guts out of half the people in the island.’

‘I am well aware that the drunkenness figures are greatly in excess of those of ten or fifteen years ago,’ Cormode replied, still succeeding in standing up for himself. ‘But nevertheless I consider any premature destruction of whiskey supplies can only lead to unnecessary resentment against the new governing authorities. And we shall need all the support we can get in the transitional period.’

I felt a glimmer of sympathy for Cormode at this. I might not agree with his argument ultimately, but he was making something of the case against Keig that I had not had the mental toughness to make myself when that white blaze outside had been started.

But Keig had risen to his feet behind the desk. His whole ironstocky body, rather than his inexpressive face, seemed to be conveying utter opposition to Cormode’s views. He spoke quietly but with all the force behind the words that his lonely years had endowed him with.

‘No one’s going to buy support with whiskey while I’m here to stop them,’ he said.

And Peter Cormode did then what I had been doing all along. He side-stepped the issue.

‘Well, whiskey is a comparatively unimportant matter,’ he said, not very graciously. ‘What is important is the election. I take it we are agreed there?’

‘If you mean the old Rota should come back,’ Keig said, ‘I agree to that.’

Cormode produced a wintry smile at this, and a quick dive into uncontroversial arrangements for the continuance of normal life in the town. He talked sense, too, and I was amused to notice when he left that he had succeeded in occupying more than half an hour of Keig’s time instead of the threatened ‘few minutes’.

And certainly in the next few days Cormode accomplished a really tremendous amount, while Keig, heedless of almost everything else, continued making his fierce assessment of exactly how much material Mylchraine had succeeded in getting over to the Kernel and saw with ferocious energy to the establishing of a twenty-four-hour massive watch on that choppy current-swirled stretch of water between the town and the low green outline of the tyrant’s last refuge.

And if Cormode in the course of all he was doing contrived to make himself pretty well known, and to make it exactly clear that he was the elected leader of the old Revolutionary Council which had been transformed into the new Progress party, I scarcely blamed him. He may have been ambitious, but his ambition was clearly harnessed to a strong belief that what he had to offer was what was best for the island.

Seeing all this out of the corner of my eye, as it were, as I hurried here and there, I could not help contrasting Cormode with the Keig I secretly feared existed behind his uncommunicative exterior. Certainly Keig, if he had ambitions to continue as leader in Oceana as he had been leader of the forces that had routed Mylchraine, did nothing whatsoever about staking his claim in the present power-vacuum in the island. Judged from this point of view, his conduct was wholly without trace of ambition. But I still suspected that in fact he was possibly far more ambitious

than Cormode. His claim, I feared, was so much higher pitched than any Cormode could possibly nurture that mere party man-oeuvrings would be totally irrelevant to it.

It consisted in nothing less than the assumption that he would simply go on giving orders as he liked and when he liked once his personal vendetta against Mylchraine was at length over.

Or did it? Behind that unexpressive face what was happening? I could not tell. And, up against that single-minded toweringly energetic concentration on Mylchraine and Mylchraine alone, I could not conceivably even try to ask about what I could not see.

And then Cormode, as the culmination of his first bout of reorganization in Lesneven, announced that he had arranged a dinner.

It was, of course, to be something more than a mere dinnerparty: it was to be a celebratory feast. It was arranged for a night exactly ten days after we had entered Lesneven and it was to be held in the hall of Brignogan School.

‘Will you be going?’ I asked Keig.

‘Yes.’

I thought that might be all. But after a little he actually gave me his reasons.

‘The men’d like it,’ he said. ‘They’d look on it as a reward for the fighting they did—even if it’s not over yet.’

There were, I suppose, something over a hundred guests, and Cormode had certainly succeeded in making excellent arrangements. There were long tables covered in white cloths. There were flowers, flags and the Band of the Lesneven Watch, resurrected from heaven knows what limbo into which it had fallen during the height of Mylchraine’s power. And there was excellent food, by island standards. It must have been a considerable feat of

organization to get hold of it all in the still not yet totally settled chaos. But Cormode had seen to it and we ate roast chicken in plenty and, essential items to any true Oceanan, huge lobster-pies and immense blayberry breaddies.

In a way I felt the two latter items were Particularly symbolic. Because the people at the dinner were not so much representatives of the actual victors as a cross-section of Oceanan life. They were the solid citizens, the farmers, the shopkeepers, with a sprinkling of estate-owners including Keig's friend, Colonel Aleyn. The fighting men were there, of course. But, looking round, I decided there were decidedly fewer of them than there ought to have been. However, right in the middle of the top table, next to Cormode, Keig sat. And I felt at least he was there on behalf of all the absent men.

Looking across at him from my place some distance away, I wondered if he was even now still thinking of Mylchraine out there on the Kernel separated from us by that mile-wide turbulent strait and safe for some time to come, I could not doubt, behind his battery of howitzers and the famous old coastal defence guns that had worried us so much at the time of Marshall Tear's attempted landing. Certainly, there was as usual nothing in Keig's expression to indicate at all what he was thinking about. Was he managing to relax, as I was, and basking for a short spell in a little glory? Or was he really still far away in that continuing fight that meant so much to him? The dark eyes gave nothing away.

Eventually the toasts came. In spite of Keig's high-handed action over the whiskey warehouse, I noted, Cormode had succeeded in getting hold of what looked like a liberal supply of the hard stuff for this stage of the celebration. The waiters, a scratch lot but willing, were bringing trays in now loaded with fresh glasses and tall opened bottles.

Perhaps it was because Cormode had had this moment already in mind that he had been so sharp about the fire, I thought. But I quickly dismissed the notion: he had been speaking what must have seemed a self-evident truth to him when he had said to Keig that taking a possibly unpopular measure was something that ought not to be done except under the stress of absolute necessity. The fortunes of the Progress party would have been what was in his thoughts.

I idly watched a waiter as he went along the line of the top table putting a generous measure of whiskey splashily into each glass as he came to it. No stickler for etiquette, he had cheerfully begun his task at one end of the line and was working his way along to the other.

Then I jerked up in my chair. The waiter at the top table had been about to pour from his bottle into Keig's glass, and quite simply and without fuss Keig had reversed the glass and had shaken his head in negative. I saw Cormode lean sideways and say something to him and heard, I swear, above the excited yammer of celebrating voices, Keig's burry tones replying: 'No. I won't, thank you. Whiskey always makes me all through-others.'

And suddenly my doubts about him, fended off over the years from even before the time we had returned to the island, and seeming in these last few days to be gathering to bursting-point, vanished clean away. I felt instead an extraordinary sensation of warm triumph, something much deeper and more meaningful than the aggressive celebration I had been willingly joining in. I was triumphing for Keig himself. I was triumphing for the man who had once lived that limited narrow life of a small farmer out there on the isolated Kernel—now bristling with Mylchraine's cornered men—and who had been forced to emerge into the wider world and had found then a certain shyness in dealing with problems of social conduct like being able to refuse to

drink in drinking company, and who had now, simply by the maturing process his character had undergone in these years of stretching up to battle with a ruler of men, learnt to sit back with calmness and say 'No'.

I drank my share of the whiskey when it came to me. I joined shortly after in singing the bawdy songs the fighting element at the gathering insisted on, a little to the scandal of the backseat triumphers Cormode had brought to the event. I got a bit drunk, perhaps more than a bit drunk. I swapped a great many stories of derring-do and hardship in 'the old days'. But all the while I nursed in my heart the sight of that one instant at the top table.

And when I saw that Keig was shaking hands with Cormode and the other members of the Revolutionary Council around I was quick to break off from the little hunched group I was in and to be standing there by the door as Keig reached it.

I thought I saw his dark eyes spark out fractionally as he noticed me, but it may have been the drink I had taken. He certainly said nothing to me, but on the other hand he certainly expected me to walk along beside him through the delightful crisp coldness of the November night.

He led me back via the seafront. It was as good a way as any other to take the longish walk back to the *Messenger* office, but I had a feeling he had chosen it specially.

He said nothing as we tramped along. I kept up with him in equal silence, gradually letting the cold air flush out my drunkenness.

Then, just as we got to the square shape of the Old Watch-point, he stopped. He took a slow look to each side, and, when he was quite sure there was no one near to overhear us, he spoke.

‘I’ve seen a way to deal with Mylchraine,’ he said. ‘I’ll need your help.’

2

I do not know what exactly I had expected Keig to propose as means of 'dealing with Mylchraine'. But his plan, when he told it to me, dissipated the euphoria I had taken away from that celebratory feast like a cold wind suddenly springing up and clearing off a cottonwool protection of mist as once a mist had gone to reveal to us the impregnable defences of Mylchraine's hangar.

What Keig intended to do was to swim over on his own to the Kernel next day, to seek out Mylchraine and to kill him himself. Just that.

The sheer arrogance of the idea blacked out all rational thought in me for long seconds.

'But—but you'd never get over there,' I managed to say at last. 'It's sheer idiocy. Damn it, I've been out in that channel with you. I know what it's like. And that wasn't in November, for God's sake.'

Keig looked at me impassively.

'When I last swum out there,' he said, 'I had to pull you along after me.'

'Yes, yes. I know that. But all the same you told me yourself that the channel's only been swum once or twice, and that was when there was a neap tide. Is it that tomorrow?'

'It's about half-way between neap and spring,' Keig said. 'Didn't you know?'

'How the hell should I—'

Words failed me. I had not meant in any case to oppose Keig's idea on the grounds of its practical impossibility. That had been merely the first thought in all the turbulence in my mind that had found expression. Yet how could I say to him what my more fundamental objection was, that the whole idea was the conception of a megalomaniac?

Then Keig, having said his say, swung on his heel and set out again towards the centre of the town. I accompanied him in total silence.

And, still almost completely mute, at dawn next day I accompanied him again to a point on the beaches between Lesneven and Hoddick where he was to put into operation the first stage of his scheme. And there in the sluggish light of a chill and misty morning we stood on the bleak and deserted sands where in my boyhood in the summer I had so often sunbathed the hours away and swum a bit and thrown flat stones at the sea—and where once I had seen myself as running ashore commando-fashion with Marshall Tear's ill-fated expeditionary force—and we experimented in the manufacture of dummy seals' heads.

These were a key to Keig's plan, which, if I thought it in essence the conception of a madman, was in its details practical enough. He intended to launch a small flotilla of these seal-heads down between us and the Kernel, and, concealed among what Mylchraine's look-outs would almost certainly take to be merely an unusual number of the seals occasionally seen in these waters, he counted upon being able to approach the shore of the little isle unobserved. It was to be my task to launch the dummy heads, my only task.

I had to admit that if the idea was to be put into practice at all Keig was going about the incidentals of it in a thoroughly efficient manner. But the whole plan was so overwhelmingly cocky—this conception of one man just

because he was Keig being able to do what all the forces we had would find a hard enough business—that the mere fact that its details had been sensibly dealt with paled into complete nothingness. Even the attempt to swim the channel in these conditions, for all Keig's extraordinary strength, was taking a risk which to ordinary heads would seem totally unjustifiable. And, even supposing that part of the plan came off, there was then the fantastic obstacle to be considered of getting at Mylchraine at all in the midst of all his followers.

In stubborn silence I went searching about the foreshore for stones of the right weight to keep floating upright the concoctions of sacking, sticks and fishermen's floats that Keig was fashioning. And after a false try or two, we got the art of making the things off to a nicety, and I watched gloomily our two final specimens swirling convincingly away from us on the strong current before we went back to the *Messenger* office where Keig, refusing even to acknowledge what we were doing by so much as a look at me, settled down to the work that had been brought him while we had been away. Morosely I left him and set about collecting the various items he had asked me to acquire for him.

That afternoon he set off.

He had calculated, probably with justice, that it would be best to make his attempt by daylight. At night searchlights swept the shore of the Kernel and Mylchraine's look-outs, we knew from the occasional shots we had heard, were particularly jumpy in the dark. So we had made our way surreptitiously back to our mock-seals starting-point, and there Keig had stripped and had coated himself from head to foot with motor-grease—it had taken me hours to find any in starved Lesneven and at one stage I had thought the whole notion would founder on my lack of success.

I collected half a dozen of our seals and tossed them out into the water. Then I turned to Keig, standing on the wet sand with a mess of dead star-fish and bits of flotsam all round him.

The short November day was already looking dusky, although dusk was not due for two hours and more. For a little Keig watched the mock seal-heads as they bobbed away from us.

‘Going nicely,’ he commented at last.

Then he came over towards me and held out his hand.

‘Thanks for everything,’ he said.

I did not take his outstretched hand.

‘No,’ I said. ‘Look I can’t let you do this. You must know that it isn’t necessary. If Mylchraine’s got to be finished, this isn’t the way to do it. We’ll get over there in the end. It’s just a question of time, of getting hold of the right sort of boats, of training men for an assault, of a hundred and one things ...’

My voice petered out. And still I had not said squarely: ‘Keig, you have become obsessed with Mylchraine. You’re sacrificing everything to a whim of your own.’

Keig’s hand dropped to his side.

‘I haven’t much time for arguing,’ he said unemotionally. ‘But just you remember how we got into Oceana in the first place. It wasn’t by coming at a time we were expected, was it? That sort of foolishness is for the like of Marshall Tear.’

‘And aren’t you doing something as damn foolish in another way as anything Tear ever did?’ I stormed at him.

‘No,’ he said, quite quietly. ‘I’m not.’

I think if he had added a single word more of justification I would have stayed there till night fell arguing with him. But his bare statement of what he believed he was doing was

too much for me. He meant to go: he saw nothing out of the way in it. Then let him go, and if it was the end perhaps that was best.

I turned away, stooped and picked up another of our seal-heads.

'I'd better set this off,' I said. 'Otherwise you'll be all on your own.'

'Yes,' Keig said. 'It'd be best.'

He turned to take up a thick tray of bundled sticks which I had made for him to float in front of himself to carry one of the few sniper's rifles our army had possessed, well wrapped in greased rags, and his own old long-handled axe. But before he had taken as much as a pace he stopped and swung round again.

'Damn it, shake hands,' he said to me.

And I remembered all that we had undergone together and I let the stupid seal-head I was holding fall and seized Keig's hand.

Word-merchant that I am, I could think of not a single thing to say to him then. For a little we stood there pumping away at each other's arms till at last Keig relaxed his grip.

He turned and walked across the sand to his weapon-carrier raft and picked it up. Then bearing it in front of him he strode into the grey-green foam-flecked water.

I stood where I was, watching as he swung out till the sea came up to his thighs. Then he lowered his small raft in, crouched down a little and started to swim. Long quiet strokes, moving slowly at first and then as a current caught him suddenly much faster.

I hurried forward to place more dummy seals in the water, peering as I did so out into the grey day. But within two minutes I had lost him.

I went on standing there afterwards, and from time to time I thought I saw something dark bobbing far out in the channel. But I never could be sure whether it was one of my mock seals or the man they were intended to protect.

I never did hear any but garbled reports of what happened out there on the Kernel. Had I had all the time in the world I could, no doubt eventually have reconstructed the whole story down to its last details, and I would then have been able to give as full an account of it as I have done of the Parts of Keig's life I can vouch for as having seen with my own eyes.

But as it is I know only the bare outline, part of which—but by no means all—I extracted from Keig himself.

There were several times, apparently, during that swim when he thought he was not going to make it. The first of them came not long after he had started out, and I suppose I myself might have seen something of it if I had chanced to be looking at the right part of that grey, turbulent, white-capped stretch of bleakly cold water at the right moment. What happened was that a rogue wave, larger than any he had coped with up to then, suddenly reared up and fell right on top of the little stick-bundle raft he was pushing ahead of himself. It pulled the frail affair right out of his grasp and then apparently picked it up and tossed it completely over. When Keig emerged from the wave himself, blinking the water out of his eyes, he saw only the bottom of the little almost completely submerged raft and this was several yards away from him. He made terrific efforts to get to it and at last succeeded. Then he reached underneath to try to rescue the two weapons he hoped it still had fastened to it.

I have always harboured slight doubts about Keig's strict veracity at this point. He told me that just as his fingers

touched the hard shapes of the two weapons he felt them slipping from their fastenings and that he was able only to get hold of the axe. But I have sometimes wondered whether he did not have a certain choice in the matter and could have rescued either the axe or the carefully-encased sniper's rifle and whether in that extremity he did not positively choose his old and trusted companion.

But, whatever happened, it left him alone in that sucking sea holding with one hand his axe, and with nothing else.

His troubles were by no means over either, but by heaving himself on to his back and letting the currents take him at times swiftly away from the shore of the Kernel and at times towards it he was at last able to swim to safety, though he was too exhausted to do anything but lie out in the open near the beach.

He was now in countryside he knew in intimate detail and he had no difficulty, though he was shaking he said 'like the ague' from exposure, in making his way to his house, now deserted and Partly in ruins he found, and installing himself in hiding there. He rested up and even nourished himself on a couple of old candles which he found where he had tucked them away in a tin box years before.

By dusk on the second night—when back in Lesneven I was driven nearly mad repeating and repeating the not very plausible story I had cooked up to account for his absence, and being sure all the while that he must be dead—he had recovered enough of his strength to set out to reconnoitre the grounds of Mylchraine's immense mansion.

And here the essential daringness of the whole operation paid off handsomely. Plainly the last thought that had entered Mylchraine's mind was that he was in any immediate danger. There was just one sentry posted at the house and he was standing on the front steps 'straight up like he was made of stuffed straw,' in Keig's words.

So there was no difficulty in penetrating the huge mansion itself. But then Keig did run into complications. He soon enough located Mylchraine—seeing his great enemy for only the second time in his life—but it appeared that the heavy-bodied tyrant was never alone. He did not even seem to be thinking of going to bed. The hours went by and still he went from room to room with a whole bevy of cronies, eating supper, playing cards, drinking, until Keig, skulking in the dark recesses of the enormous house, was driven to debate whether to have a go at him however many people surrounded him or simply creep back out of the house. He had reckoned that he would hardly be able to stay hidden inside once it was daylight.

But dawn, it turned out, was what Mylchraine was waiting for. Hiding, wondering how much longer it would be safe to leave making the attempt, Keig noticed a certain amount of activity that indicated that some sort of witchcraft ceremony was being prepared for in the biggest room in the big house—‘a sort of dancing place’ he called it—and from a scrap of conversation he overheard as various servants carried in the paraphernalia required he gathered that the moment of dawn itself would form the climax of the rites.

With considerable audacity, he waited his chance and then got into the big room itself in a pause in the preparations and contrived to hide behind the long curtains draping one of the tall windows at the far end of the chamber from a throne-like chair which he presumed would be the centre of activities. He hoped that the ceremony would be lit as murkily as the esbat in the Rota had been and that this would provide him with a chance of creeping out and getting near enough to Mylchraine to strike.

But in this he was disappointed. When Mylchraine eventually entered, dressed as he had been at the esbat in a long black flowing cloak and with a black skull cap on top of his curious waxen-cheeked face, Keig realized that the

affair was to be lit not by torches but by ordinary electric lamps and plenty of them.

But then again he had a stroke of luck. Because apparently it was part of the ceremony that everyone should watch for the first streaks of light of the new day. He had what must have been a nerve-racking minute or two when shortly before dawn was due someone went along swishing open wide the curtains in front of all the windows down the east-facing side of the big room. But they left the windows on the end wall untouched since no dawn would show through them. And soon Keig's moment came: all the lights in the whole big room were turned out.

The moment he had grasped what had happened he simply walked out of his hiding-place, quietly made his way down the length of the room and eventually stationed himself, axe in hand, at what he judged to be a spot only five yards or so from Mylchraine's throne.

And then, after an appallingly long wait, in which he detected certain stealthy movements quite near him that must have strained his nerves to the utmost, the first signs of day fully appeared in the east. Almost at once there came a ringing ritual call from Mylchraine himself: 'I see the light.'

That, it seemed, was the signal for the lamps to be switched on again in a single swift blaze of illumination.

And in that sudden glare Mylchraine found himself confronting the tower-like form of Keig, still heavily black-greased, with his long-handled axe held lightly and loosely in the palms of his hands. But Keig equally was subjected to almost as unexpected an apparition himself. There on the floor between him and his enemy was a girl, naked as he was and more so, yet not black-stained but luminously white-skinned. She was stretched out as the girl had been at the ceremony in the Rota, crouched over her knees with

arms and hair spread on the floor pointing towards the Master of the esbat.

It says much for Keig that he did not allow this totally unexpected event to deflect him from what he had decided to do. He took the two steps forward he had planned, only he had to make them a little obliquely. And then he spoke.

‘Mylchraine,’ he said—in what one of the onlookers later called ‘a voice of thunder’, and no wonder—‘I sentence you to death.’

And he brought his axe crashing down on the centre of Mylchraine’s black skull-cap.

I suppose Keig was lucky not to have been torn to pieces on the spot. But, on the other hand, he had achieved total surprise and this was completely effective. Nobody moved so much as a muscle for several seconds after that blow of his had been delivered, and during that time he heaved his axe-head out of Mylchraine’s skull—‘I’d got it deep in,’ he said to me—and crashed his way out through one of the tall uncurtained windows.

He was chased, naturally enough. But his pursuers lacked heart. With Mylchraine gone they knew their time had come to an end, and it was without any Particular difficulty that he threw them off. And it was equally without any sort of trouble, after he had lain hidden near the isle jetty for some time and had watched the news of Mylchraine’s fate arriving there and seen the guard Keepers abandon their post, that he got hold of a boat and set off for Lesneven.

I saw the boat coming myself. You can imagine that I had spent almost all my time shut up in a room at the *Messenger* office which was high up enough to have a view out to sea and using Keig’s own field-glasses from it with a sort of flogged-on desperation.

As soon as I saw the boat with the one broad figure rowing I knew what it must be. I snatched up the telephone like a madman and gabbled out instructions to all and sundry in case any of the men Keig himself had put on watch started firing at him.

And half an hour later I was kneeling on the sharp granite edge of the town landing-stage leaning over to give Keig a hand up.

He hauled himself over the edge and got to his feet. Then he looked slowly all round about him. He drew in a deep breath.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘he’s toppled now.’

3

It was just one month after the death of Mylchraine that the Oceanan Rota met, for the first time in fifteen years. The four weeks between the two events were as disturbing as any I have ever spent.

I think that at the moment I first spotted Keig rowing back from the Kernel and guessed that he must, in spite of all the odds, have dealt with Mylchraine I believed all my problems were over. But by the time that I had heard him on the grey Lesneven town-wharf confirm the news that Mylchraine was no more I already had inklings that the whole fantastic expedition had solved nothing. And later, as bit by bit I managed to prise out of Keig the rough outline of what had happened on the little isle, my misgivings swiftly grew in substance.

The worst moment of all was when he told me about the actual killing. I heard other versions later—my brother John was one of the witnesses—and it was only from them that I learnt the very words Keig had used before he had raised that axe of his and brought it thudding down on Mylchraine's head. But even from what he told me himself back in the editor's room at the *Messenger* office that day I found myself beset again with the sharpest of doubts.

They were to be resolved sooner than I had expected and not at all in any way I had envisaged, but this did not make them at the time any less rootedly poisonous.

But it was clear to me from the beginning that Keig had constituted himself judge and jury, prosecuting counsel and

executioner of Rolph Mylchraine. And, convinced as I was that Mylchraine was in fact guilty of acts which any court would have had no hesitation in condemning, I could not really reconcile myself to the manner of his death. I even saw that it was in a way the only possible course that could have been taken in all the circumstances. Yet it still made me to the marrow of my bones uneasy.

Had I been sure that it was an ending, a complete ending, I would, I think, have been able to acquiesce reluctantly in the harsh necessity of thus abruptly and violently bringing the tyrant's career to a finish. But, far from being sure this was an ending, I was plagued with the fear that it was, after the many intimations I had had of what was to come, a real beginning. Was it to be that Mylchraine would prove just the first of a growing list of people Keig would in time condemn to death and execute or have executed—or was he, in fact, not the first but the second, the second after cheerful greedy little Fred Quiddie?

And, of course, there was no telling. Keig remained after the death of Mylchraine just what he had been before it, an inward-turned figure. I did succeed by blunt questioning in extracting a little from him, but I never in all those weeks felt I was at all seeing inside the man.

Now that he could no longer reply, with truth or not, that for him the future was the toppling of Mylchraine, I was able to put to him the questions that had been in my mind from more or less the time, almost a full year ago now, that Cormode had landed at Caloestown.

What did he intend to do? How did he see himself in the new Oceana? What part did he want to play? Was he going to go in for politics like Cormode himself, or what?

He looked up at me when I asked him point-blank this last question. That familiar little quick frown came and went on his broad forehead.

‘Cormode asked me to join that Progress party of his,’ he said.

‘What?’ I exclaimed in pure astonishment.

‘He told me that he would find me a seat in the Rota.’

‘What did you say? When was this?’

‘The day before yesterday.’

I waited. But plainly Keig was going to tell me no more unless I pressed him.

‘Well, what did you say to Cormode?’ I asked.

‘What d’you think? I saw all I wanted of councils and committees when we were in Dublin.’

I wondered for a moment whether to try and persuade him that all committees were not like the Revolutionary Council. And then I decided that, since to all intents and purposes they were, it was no use trying to prove otherwise to someone like Keig.

‘So what are you going to do?’ I said at last.

‘What I’m asked to do,’ he replied.

I had to think about this for quite some time, but Keig was never one to notice if a conversation had lapsed.

He was going to do what he was asked to do. What exactly did this imply? It sounded humble enough certainly. But, against this, I knew that Keig had never been one to serve humbly, even in his earliest, most inexperienced days. He had always judged with a cold eye and he had not hesitated to act when what he had seen failed to come up to the standards he held, as often things did fail. So what was he expecting to be asked to do now?

I puzzled on, and at last I thought I had seen through to the end of it.

‘You expect to be asked to look after the running of various things in the island?’ I asked.

His dark eyes regarded me for an instant.

‘That’s for the Rota to say, isn’t it?’ he replied. ‘It’s the Rota that says what’s to be done in Oceana. It always was, and soon it’s going to be so again.’

‘Yes,’ I said.

And there did not seem to be much more, in face of this impeccably constitutional reply, that I could ask. A silence fell, as was so often the case in my exchanges with Keig.

Yet I did not feel that everything in the garden was now lovely.

So Keig saw himself as, or was he even just putting himself forward as, the simple servant of the Rota. But I knew he had no time for committee compromises, and although the election had yet to be held then, I doubted if the Oceanan Rota was going to be Particularly distinguished for forceful decisions, not if it had got a quota of stolid stony-eyed procrastinating woldsmen among its number. And for how long would Keig go on carrying out decisions he did not respect?

Or was he planning to see that somehow his own decisions went to the Rota and came back to him with the rubber-stamp of democratic procedure wet on their bottoms?

I could not tell. I could not tell.

And in any case I strongly suspected that the Rota was not going to be a rubber-stamp for Keig. In those days we were very busy with the considerable task of disbanding the brigades, a task which Keig, once Mylchraine had gone, was as eager to have carried out as Cormode was. And with Keig I was also much occupied with such things as visiting our wounded in the Lesneven hospital, going to see the widows

and mothers of men who had been killed in the fighting and with all the tough miserably complicated personal problems left by the receding tide of war. But I did manage to see, too, a good deal of the Progress party's activities, and I was considerably impressed by them. I would have been very much surprised if it did not end up with a substantial proportion of Rota seats.

Should I, I wondered, warn Keig of this. I had half a mind to, and then I thought I would not. After all I reasoned, if Keig intended, as I more and more believed that he did, to claim full power in the island for himself, then Peter Cormode's Progress party was going to be the obstacle that might stop him, and efficient unlovable genuinely democratic Peter Cormode would be the one man who might for Keig's own good bar his path.

But it was with a feeling of a real release from care that, when all the excitement of the election had passed, four weeks after the death of Mylchraine I accompanied Keig to the Rota for its opening session, using ironically that same back way in that I had used on my last visit to the place six long years before. I walked down the high stone-walled corridor and through the robing room with my cheerfulness growing at every second. This was going to be an occasion to savour, after all.

We had timed our arrival so that we were almost the first to enter the chamber. An attendant, wearing, dug up from heaven knows where, the picturesque old green uniform with gold-laced tricorne hat that the Rota attendants had always worn, showed us to two small gilt chairs that had been placed for us just by the door into the upper wide encircling gallery.

We were to be the only ones other than the elected Delegates present on that day. Keig because he had been

asked, myself because Keig had said he wanted to have me there.

The attendant, unable to keep a deep slow smile of satisfaction off his face for all his desire to look properly grave, left us with a clumsy attempt at a bow. I looked round at the building I had not set foot in since that fateful, extraordinary and tawdry night six years ago when Keig had burst into Mylchraine's esbat—and into my life—a hounded, half-naked, panting, bewildered man.

All traces of the nasty uses the building had been put to since it had last seen the debates of the Rota had been energetically removed. Gone were the yards of black bunting and the obscene pictures that had been nailed to the sage-green plaster of the walls; gone were the laden tables and the crude torches. The little circular-shaped hall had regained all its simple dignity. The central floor was, as had been customary, entirely bare, with its radiating bands of alternate white and grey clean and uncluttered ready for the speakers who one by one would come down from their places on the surrounding green benches to address their fellow Delegates from this area. The leather of the benches had been scrupulously patched where it had become torn; the clerks' table, gleamingly polished, had on it two new record books lying open at white untouched pages. Above, the President's chair stood empty, awaiting the election of its first occupant.

Even the holes in the plasterwork had been filled in, I noticed, and repainted to the exact shade of their surrounds. I recognized Abraham Skillicorne's hand in this. He had been, I believe, the only Delegate from the old Rota to have been elected to the new. Restoring the chamber to its exact former state would be the sort of act of piety his tradition-loving soul would delight in.

All honour to him, too. Seeing the chamber, under its quiet low dome, back again in the state it always ought to have been in, I felt that this summed up all we had struggled for. Suddenly tears were welling up behind my eyes.

I wondered if Keig was feeling the same emotions. Or, my spectre of doubt re-awakening abruptly inside me, was he I asked myself busy with grim calculations and plans.

He was sitting there on his small elegant-looking gilt chair a couple of feet away from me, his axe—that killing axe—propped incongruously beside him, and his eyes were traversing the scene below us. But they had that old inward-turned look in them that baffled me now just as much as it always had done.

What I did see, looking at him now, were the deeper cut lines that surrounded those eyes and the plentiful grey in his tousled once-black hair. Even his massive shoulders were bowed a little, I thought, not so much from the physical efforts of the last six years as from the weight of knowledge that that time had brought him. He had learnt unexpected things about himself I did not doubt, about the buried reserve of implacable toughness, of ruthlessness even, that had lain for all his early years untouched and unneeded in his nature. And he had learnt equally a good deal about other people—how to use them for his ends, how to make them find in themselves strengths they had no idea they possessed, and what treacherous and unexpected weaknesses often lay uncharted in even the plainest of characters. What did he mean to do with this double knowledge, I asked.

And I could not answer. I could not answer.

I turned away to look down into the chamber: the Delegates were beginning to swarm in. They entered by twos and threes, stood glancing round briefly on the central

floor, and then, like men in a daze, went and took their places in the encircling rows of green-leather seats.

I recognized a face or two. Skillicorne, of course, now deputy leader of Cormode's Progress party, with the comfortable knowledge that Oceana's first organized political group had exceeded its own best hopes in the election, beaming and amiable to everybody—though no doubt unable to stop himself, old politico that he was, from assessing strengths and frailties, potential trouble and reliable tractability.

And there was tubby little Francis Crowe. He had already set up a barber's shop in Lesneven, bursting to install all the latest fads, and he had been elected for the Brignogan ward. But he was our only former comrade-in-arms that I was able to spot.

The re-enfranchised citizens of Oceana, in fact, where they had not elected the impressive contestants of the Progress party, had voted for solid respectable men they had known all their lives, men who had had little to do with Mylchraine but who equally had had nothing to do with Keig.

I leant across and tapped Keig on the knee now.

'You could call them sheep and cattle,' I said, jerking my head at the assembling Delegates. 'The sheep Cormode chose and the cattle that wandered into the pen as well.'

Keig looked levelly at the Delegates.

'Yes,' he agreed. 'Not many lean old wolves.'

'There's gratitude for you,' I said, idly enough.

'No,' Keig answered, with that old immovable seriousness, 'this is what we were fighting for: for their right to send who they want here.'

There was a stir down below. I looked and saw that Cormode had come in attended by a small band of intimates

from the Dublin days, people like Willine, the poet. Cormode's deep-set eyes were flashing with unquellable pleasure at this moment and his voice was loud with excitement as he went up to Abraham Skillicorne and congratulated him on his arrangements.

'Someone's happy,' I said to Keig.

'He's got his work to do at last,' Keig answered.

And then Skillicorne down on the central floor, seeing the last of the Delegates taking their places, clapped his hands for silence—rather like a lady teacher, I thought—and the meeting, the historic occasion, began.

'Fellow Delegates,' Skillicorne said in his high rather piping, but carrying voice. 'Fellow Delegates, I think our first action today, on this day, must be to elect from amongst us a President, to choose one of our number to take that time-honoured chair and to guide us in all we do and say.'

All eyes turned to the high-backed vacant chair above the clerks' table.

'Fellow Delegates,' Abraham Skillicorne went on, 'I should like to propose to you the name of Peter Cormode for that office.'

He paused for a moment, beamingly.

'And I feel,' he went on, 'that it would be not inappropriate for me to add to his name the words "Former Chairman of the Revolutionary Council of Oceana".'

There was a rich murmur of agreement. However conservatively many of the citizens of Oceana had voted, everybody here knew where honour was due. The name of the Revolutionary Council was potent indeed. As Abraham Skillicorne had exactly calculated.

He looked all round the circular chamber now.

‘Very well,’ he said, ‘in the absence of any further nomination I hereby propose that Peter Cormode be elected our President by acclamation.’

And, I mentally added, without putting a lot of honest Delegates to the cold decision of voting yes or no for someone who was after all something of an upsetter of the placid order of things.

From the two circles of green-leather seats there was the beginning of a long murmur of acquiescence. But suddenly it came to an abrupt halt. A voice was shouting something.

It was little Francis Crowe. He had jumped to his feet and was waving his hand like a schoolboy in a hurry to leave the room.

‘Please,’ he called out. ‘Please.’

Everybody turned and looked at him. He blushed, painfully obviously.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ he said. ‘Er—no. Fellow Delegates, I—I don’t know how to do this, but—Well, I want to—’

He looked upwards with a sudden fiery little expression.

‘Damn it all,’ he said. ‘We all know who really saved this country. There’s only one person who should be President and that’s—Look, I propose the name of Thomas Keig.’

There was a confused buzz of questioning down below. I saw Cormode lean over from his seat in the front row and beckon urgently to Skillicorne. They had a short and agitated conference while I toyed with the idea that Keig had put Francis Crowe up to this, and at once dismissed the notion. Poor Francis, his intervention had been all too plainly a spur-of-the-moment affair.

Then Skillicorne held up his hand—I remember how large and white it looked—and begged for silence.

‘Fellow Delegates,’ he said, smiling his old ambiguous watery smile. ‘Fellow Delegates, I fear it is my duty, as one who has had the honour to sit in this Rota before, to point out to those of you who may not be as well acquainted with our customs and rules as they might be, that the regulations have always been quite clear. Clear beyond doubt. The President of the Rota must come from among the ranks of the elected Delegates.’

He surveyed the chamber, dipping his gaze I thought as it chanced to pass over Keig and myself in the gallery.

‘After all,’ he went on, ‘what we are doing is to elect a person to preside over this assembly, no more than that.’

I leant over towards Keig.

‘Only whoever presides over this assembly happens to hold executive power,’ I said.

Keig made no reply.

Down below us, poor little Francis Crowe slowly subsided back into his seat shamed into total silence.

‘Then if there are no further candidates ...’ Abraham Skillicorne said, a little hastily.

A steadily rising tide of applause from the Delegates provided him with answer enough. He went across to Cormode’s place and led him, with something of the air of a father leading his son up to receive a prize, to the President’s chair.

I turned half-round to Keig, grabbing at this chance to penetrate his time-encrusted defences.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘this must be what Cormode’s dreamt of ever since Marshall Tear went. I wonder how he’ll make out. He likes holding the reins, you know. Always did.’

‘There’s not enough to him to do more’n a mite of harm,’ Keig answered.

It was a good judgment. And it got my probing precisely nowhere.

The applause continued. Cormode sat in the high-backed chair and listened to it, looking round, with the light of triumph glowing shinily on his pale cheeks, at all the assembled faces—which seemed to me at that moment to be divided entirely between the white-faced, sharp-eyed and smooth, and the red, gog-glingly heavy and stupid.

At last their plaudits began to die away and Cormode rose to his feet.

I leant back towards Keig.

‘Brace yourself for a solid hour of verbal book-keeping,’ I said.

And that, it seemed, was precisely what we were in for. So it was some time after Cormode’s review had reached the events in which I had had my own minor share that I began to pay much attention. But when I did so I sat up abruptly in a sudden blaze of white anger.

The account I was hearing was quietly and blandly distorting what really had happened. It was a version of affairs, I realized soon enough, which set out deliberately to push Keig from the centre of the stage. To hear Cormode placidly retailing event after event one would have thought that right up until the final few months of the struggle Keig had played only a clearly subordinate role.

I was paying now the very closest attention, but I had to concede that Cormode had re-written his history with a great deal of skill. I believe if in the first flush of my anger I had caught him out in some deliberate untruth I would have upped and denounced him on the spot. But never once was there an opportunity of pinning him down. Yet the general impression his whole speech was leaving was entirely plain. It was that the war had been fought by the Revolutionary

Council from Dublin, with the Council directing the various forces on the island through links more formal and less until the moment had come for the move to Oceana and the final welding together of disparate elements to make up the army that had 'under our chosen commander-in-chief brought Mylchraine to his knees.

And it occurred to me, listening hard for one fatal slip, that to almost every one of Cormode's hearers all this would appear to be not a gigantic misrepresentation but rather the clear, perhaps mildly surprising, explanation of muddled events which at the time had presented the appearance of almost complete chaos. None but those who had been in direct contact with Keig in his years in the island could really know the truth. And, besides myself, there was only poor, already crushed Francis Crowe present who was in that position.

And what a monstrous distortion it all was, I thought furiously. Here was Cormode, who had backed the misguided Marshall Tear, who had when the Revolutionary Council at last began acquiring funds procrastinated appallingly over launching a new attack, who when Keig had established himself on the island and had succeeded in inflicting a substantial defeat on the Keepers had found excuse after excuse for not supplying extra arms because—I felt convinced of it now—he must have heard that Mylchraine had procured stocks of napalm and wanted to see the result before taking any risk, here was the man who had made all these timorous errors, not forgetting his backing of the brutal and flashy Marcus Calo, now standing here blatantly allocating to himself and his precious Council all the credit for the victory Keig, and Keig virtually alone, had won.

I turned to Keig now.

‘Listen,’ I said, ‘you ought to put a stop to this. It’s sheer distortion of the truth.’

But all the response I got was a slow decisive negative shake of the head.

What did it mean?

I longed to take Keig by the shoulders and shake some fuller reply out of him—as if I could ever have done that—but here we were more or less trapped in a public place and I could not even raise my voice above a whisper.

This self-reliant taciturnity of Keig’s had hardly mattered when he was only his own master. But now, now that he had made himself a power in the land for better or worse, it mattered like hell to know what he was thinking. And I did not know.

Did this silence of his in the face of all Cormode was saying mean that he was so sure of himself that all the fabrication we had been treated to could be regarded as so much soap-bubble blowing? Was he certain that before long it would all be wafted away and his own account of things would stand four-square in its place? To all appearances, this had begun to seem less and less likely. But I could not believe that Keig would willingly allow his solid position to be sapped to nothing in this fashion. And the more daring Cormode’s displacing of him grew the more convinced I became that Keig had something hidden in reserve which in due time would turn the tables utterly.

Of course, I argued to myself, he has said that he is here to do what the Rota asks him to do and perhaps at this moment he is simply taking in the fact that, with the Rota dominated by Cormode, he is not going to be asked to do anything. I wondered then if that was what Cormode’s offer of a Progress party seat had been about. Was it Cormode attempting to make the same sort of test of him that I had tried to make with my questions, seeking to find out what

his intentions were? And had Keig's refusal of the seat, no doubt curt enough, led to this scheme of Cormode's to play him down into nothingness?

But as I listened on to Cormode's nearly concluded travesty version of the island's immediate past his recital took a new turn.

'So much for the main outline of the course which events took to bring us to this moment,' he said. 'But before I come to look forward to a happier future I would like to examine in more detail some Particular sections of the past. And I do this because I very much fear that these events of yesterday may, if they are not brought fully to light, yet cast a baneful influence on this future of ours which ought to be untarnished by even the shadows of misery.'

There was a movement among the Delegates all round him. It was not so much a rustle of re-awakened attention—whatever effect Cormode's style of oratory had had on me it had held the rest of his audience all along in a wondering grip—but a single concerted leaning forward in expectation.

'Fellow Delegates,' that chill voice continued, 'I have to inform you that the man we entrusted with the command of our forces in the late struggle has manifested in the past—and shows no sign today of any intent to effect an alteration—a settled contempt for the democratic processes which he purported himself to be fighting for.'

There was a tiny sharp hiss from all around at this sudden newly-opened prospect. But not one face turned away from Cormode and looked up in the direction where everybody knew Keig was to be seen.

'This settled contempt for the proper authority of the people', Cormode proceeded, 'began as long ago as the very start of our active revolutionary struggle. Let me give you just two examples. First, Thomas Keig, being possessed of a considerable sum in gold seized from the tyrant

Mylchraine, refused to place that sum under the authority of the Revolutionary Council, and at no subsequent time did he cease to retain improper control of those funds. Second, Thomas Keig, in defiance of the agreed policy of the Revolutionary Council, attempted a landing on the shores of this island. That landing, as you know, was in a measure a success. Keig and his companions contrived at least to avoid capture for a long period and eventually were able to join with the other forces of the revolution in the work of deposing the tyrant.'

He fixed the group of Delegates directly opposite him with a cold glance of unrelaxed concentration.

'But at what a cost that landing was made,' he said. 'It is not too much to state that the preparations which the tyrant Mylchraine undertook as a result of that hasty and under-prepared move were such that they were directly responsible for causing the campaign to be prolonged far longer than was necessary, at an expense of how much blood and misery I need not say.'

I could stand this no longer. Whatever Keig might have in mind to do in the future, this was the man I had been hunted with and had fought beside who was being attacked in this lie-permeated fashion.

I positively flung myself round on him.

'Tell them,' I whispered fiercely. 'Tell them. These people just don't know. They've had their heads in the sand for years. Tell them that all this is just a pack of half-truths and worse.'

But Keig sat looking straight ahead. He might have been lost in some ancient dream ever since we had entered the Rota chamber.

Down at the President's chair Cormode was speaking now with a slow calmness that held his listeners like so many

hypnotized rabbits.

‘Fellow Delegates, it is my solemn duty to ask you to vote for the immediate arrest of Thomas Keig and for the setting up of a court to bring him to a just and proper trial.’

And it was plain from the straining attention he was getting all round the chamber that the moment he cared to call for a formal vote—as stickler for procedure that he was he would undoubtedly do—he would get it overwhelmingly. Only one thing could stop him: Keig getting up and putting the record straight then and there. Leaving a reply till a trial could take place would be leaving it too long: from such a procedure it was certain Keig would emerge discredited, whatever the verdict. Cormode would have too much time to elaborate his smears.

But if Keig were to speak now ... I had seen him so many times turning some demoralized rabble back into a group of fighting men to have any doubts of his ability on this score. He had come a long, long way from that first halting blurted speech Cormode had heard him make in the Swedenborgian hall back in Dublin. He could bring to anything he had to say today the weight of all the accumulated authority of the past six years. He would jerk this waxen assembly into knowing the truth in less than ten minutes.

He must be made to answer, to fight back as he had fought back against Mylchraine from the moment his land on the Kernel had been taken from him.

I turned to him again, though at the moment I did so I think I realized at the back of my mind precisely what his eventual answer was going to be.

‘Keig,’ I said, putting into the stifled syllable all the force I was capable of. ‘Get up and speak. Now. That hidebound fool down there thinks that because he’s in his precious democratic assembly you can’t get at him. Break their rules.

Tell them the truth. They'll turn and laugh him out of existence.'

But at that moment they were by no means laughing. They were sitting tied to Cormode as by so many lines running to his hands.

'Fellow Delegates,' he resumed, cold as ice still, 'will you raise your hands to signify you wish the arrest to take place?'

I swung round to Keig once more, my thoughts pounding in a jetting current of determination to force him to stand up and save himself.

He was not there.

The little gilt chair not two feet away from mine was empty, and that old polished-handled glinting-bladed axe lay propped up against it like an object out of another world. Of Keig, as I had half-known would be so, there was not the least sign.

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